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FORBIDDEN ROAD—KABUL TO SAMARKAND

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FORBIDDEN ROAD—
KABUL TO SAMARKAND

by

ROSITA FORBES

With 76 half-tone illustrations

NEW YORK
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First Edition

TO ALL FELLOW TRAVELLERS WHO

"for lust of knowing what should not be known"

have taken the road to Samarkand.

CONTENTS

CHAPTER		PAGE
1.	In the Beginning	1
2.	Flying Dutch	5
3.	Indian Kaleidoscope	9
4.	Peshawar—On the Roofs	18
5.	Peshawar—In the Bazaar	20
6.	Peshawar—In a Merchant's House	23
7.	The Kohat Pass	27
8.	Invisibility in the Khyber	32
9.	Policy on the Afghan-Indian Frontier	36
10.	Jellalabad—The Street of Cooking-pots	40
11.	The Nomads' Road to Kabul	43
12.	Kabul	48
13.	A Black Day in Kabul	51
14.	Modern Afghanistan	57
15.	Three Came to Lunch	62
16.	To Kandahar	67
17.	In Kandahar	73
18.	Travelling with Afghans	76
19.	Preparations at Kabul	83
20.	Bamyan, Valley of the Giant Buddhas	86
21.	Through the Hindu Kush to Doab	91
22.	Midnight on the Mazar Pass	99
23.	In a Back Garden	113
24.	The Mecca of Central Asia	119
25.	Grave and Gay in Mazar-i-Sherif	123
26.	"And Then the Police Arrived"	127

CHAPTER PAGE
27. Balkh of the "Silk Road" 132
28. Across the Afghan Desert 136
29. River Port of Tadjikistan 145
30. Introduction to a Train 151
31. One Chooses One's Friends 155
32. Seven Miles to Bokhara 163
33. In Search of a Bed 170
34. Old and New Bokhara 176
35. Surprising Conversation on a Rubbish-heap . 181
36. New Heaven and New Earth 187
37. Delusion Among the Cooks 193
38. In Search of the Chor Minor 199
39. Conversation Under a Tractor . . . 210
40. Difficulties of Leaving Bokhara . . . 218
41. To Samarkand 226
42. Morning in Samarkand 235
43. The Glory of Tamerlane 241
44. On the Hill of Tombs 249
45. The Day Ends 253
46. In Samarkand 260
47. To Tashkent 269
48. Journey's End 275
Index 283

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

FACING PAGE

The Kyber Pass. Jamrood Fort and the road through the Pass 32

The author at the barrier on the Indian-Afghan frontier in the Kyber Pass 33

Tribesmen in the Kyber Pass 33

The frontier border, Kyber Pass 44

A caravan in the Pass 44

Entrance to the Pass 44

His Highness Sadar Hashim Khan, Prime Minister of Afghanistan 45

His Majesty Zahir Shah, King of Afghanistan 45

The modern Afghan army 68

Joys of photography in Afghanistan; Captain Galloway surrounded by an interested crowd 69

Bridge over Kabul River 69

The mosque at Kandahar 69

The fortress of Ghazni on the road to Kandahar 69

A main street in Kabul 84

Modern Kabul 84

Panorama of Kabul 85

The carpet market in Old Kabul 85

A market in the city 85

FACING PAGE

Pathan types in Kabul 85

Istalif 86

The old castle at Zohak 86

General view of the Bamyan cliffs, showing the caves and the niche of the largest Buddha 87

Looking across the valley towards one of the giant Buddhas at Bamyan 88

150-ft. Buddha above the village street at Bamyan 88

The largest Buddha at Bamyan 89

Detail of Bamyan cliffs, showing the caves that were once Buddhist monasteries 89

The valley of Bamyan seen from the head of the giant Buddha 104

The upper half of the giant Buddha, Bamyan 104

Doab-i-Mezhari, where the Afghan government is building a rest house 105

The foothills leading to the first range of the Hindu Kush 105

In the Hindu Kush 108

Dara Shikari, the gorge deep in the Hindu Kush 109

Group of pilgrims in the Hindu Kush 116

Transporting a yurt, the felt-covered hut of Turkoman nomads 116

Turkoman travellers at Kowshi 116

The author in the Hindu Kush 117

Pul-i-Khumri on the road into the Hindu Kush 117

The Tashkurgan gorge in the Hindu Kush 126

The "lunar" country; barren hills beyond the second range of the Hindu Kush 127

Camel caravan in the Hindu Kush 127

FACING PAGE

Mazar-i-Sherif, "Mecca of Central Asia," the mosque of Hazrat Ali 130

Pilgrims at the supposed tomb of Ali 130

Side view of the Hazrat Ali 131

Ali's mosque, from inside the court 131

The main gate of the Hazrat Ali 131

All that is left of Moslem Balkh; the ramparts attacked by Alexander are in ruins 142

A typical group of Turkoman shepherds at Balkh 142

Escort of Afghan troopers crossing the northern desert 143

The "forbidden frontier" of Russian Central Asia and Afghanistan 143

Ruined façade of the largest college in Bokhara 176

The Chor Minor mosque at Bokhara 176

Old Bokhara, with the tower of death 176

View of Old Samarkand 177

The famous Registan square at Samarkand 238

The medersa of Shir Dar 238

Bibi Khanaum, tomb of Tamerlane's favourite wife 239

Façade of Bibi Khanaum 239

A market in Samarkand 246

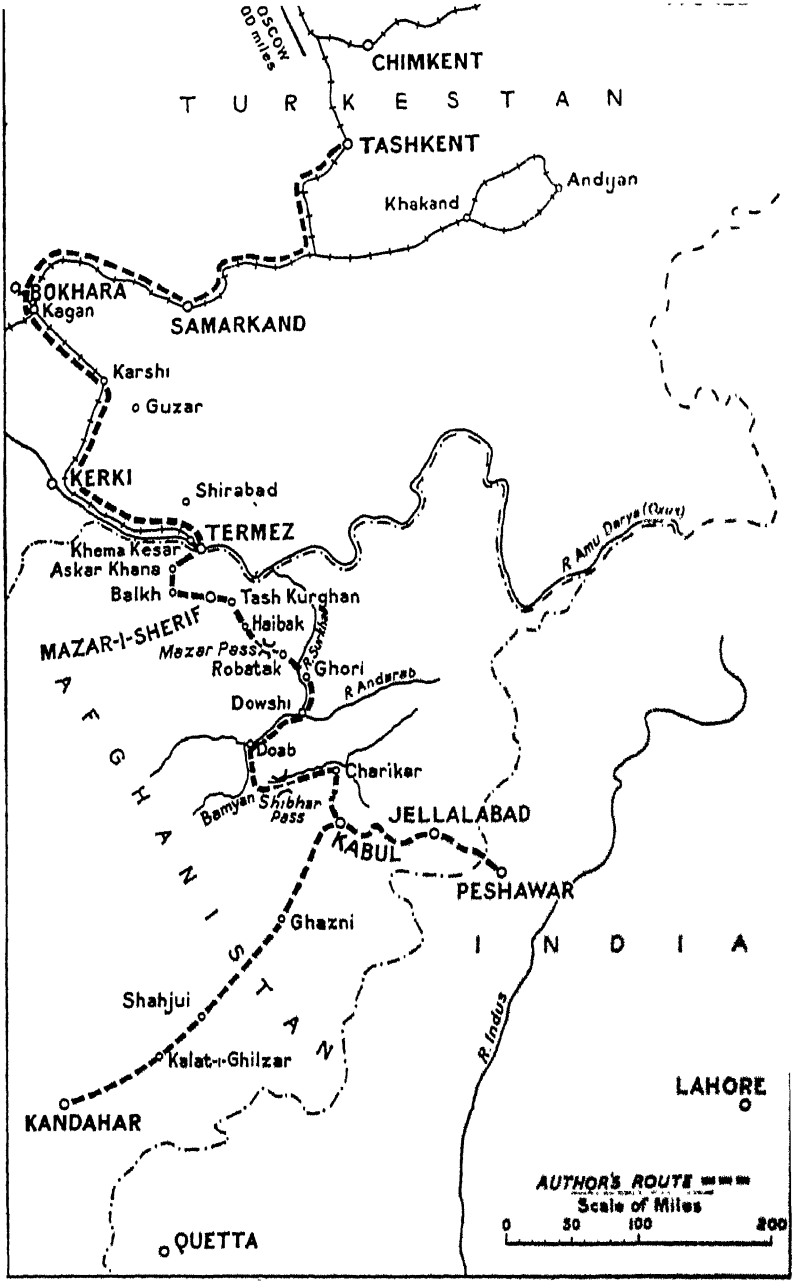
A country market outside Samarkand 246

Gur Emir, the tomb of Tamerlane at Samarkand 247

Shah Zinde outside Samarkand 247

The Old Way. Usbeg villager tea-drinking; veiled women wearing the parandja and chadour 270

The New Way. An Usbeg cotton picker; a modern Usbeg girl embroidering caps; a melon seller near Tashkent 271


MOSCOW
900 miles
CHIMKENT
T U R K E S T A N
TASHKENT
Andijan
Khakand
BOKHARA
Kagan
SAMARKAND
Karshi
Guzar
KERKI
Shirabad
TERMEZ
Khema Kesar
Askar Khana
Balkh
Tash Kurghan
Haibak
MAZAR-I-SHERIF
Mazar Pass
Robatak
R. Surkhab
Ghori
R. Andarab
Dowshi
Doab
Charikar
Bamyan
Shibhar Pass
JELLALABAD
KABUL
PESHAWAR
A F G H A N I S T A N
Ghazni
I N D I A
Shahjui
Kalat-i-Ghilzar
KANDAHAR
R. Indus
LAHORE
QUETTA
R. Amu Darya (Oxus)
AUTHOR'S ROUTE
Scale of Miles
0 50 100 200

FORBIDDEN ROAD—KABUL TO SAMARKAND

CHAPTER I

IN THE BEGINNING

No journey is given to one complete like an egg. More nearly it resembles a house of cards which one builds and sees wantonly destroyed. With infinite precautions one starts again, and after many unexpected disasters, the edifice begins to assume shape and character. Then one is tempted to add here a tower and there another storey with the result that the whole structure becomes top-heavy. As often as not, it collapses under the weight of the last card representing a penultimate plan.

So it happened with my recent venture.

Six years ago in Meshed, a holy city of the Shias, which lies in the North-East corner of Persia, I stood in the middle of one of the widest streets in Asia and watched fugitives from Turkmenistan drive by in their high-wheeled covered wagons. Women and children were heaped among household goods, but what I remember most clearly is the succession of men's faces, dark and hard with flat cheekbones, and the enormous sheepskin hats like haloes.

Somebody said to me: "They're farmers and shepherds from across the Soviet frontier," and another, with more imagination: "This place, where we stand, is the beginning of the Golden Road to Samarkand."

I looked then, far down between the trees and the crowds from every part of Asia, and I saw, of course, the

merchants described by Flecker, ride out of the great gates with singing-boys and water-pipes; a caravan of two-humped Bactrian camels and who knows what thoughts in their hearts—"We travel not for trafficking alone——"

Time passed. On a spring afternoon in London I called at the Soviet Embassy. In front of an enormous desk in a room reminiscent of Geneva and the waste spaces of any conference, I explained that it had become essential for me to go to Samarkand. An official immediately assumed the air of detachment by which Soviet Russia hopes to conceal her unease in matters bureaucratic. He said: "Personally, I have no objection, but I don't expect Moscow will agree."

"Through Afghanistan," I added.

"Is there a way—are you sure——?"

We looked at maps. From them we acquired a name, Termez. "That must be the frontier——" I suggested.

"Perhaps, or here, you see, is Askar Khana."

We agreed that this was a very agreeable name. And immediately I visualised it as a town. The illusion lasted for nearly a year.

With immense care, I wrote out a declaration explaining why I must at all costs go to Kabul, the capital of Afghanistan, and thence across the Hindu Kush and the boundary Oxus river, now the Amu Darya, to Russian Turkestan. And eventually, the form in duplicate, went to Moscow. I knew quite well that this was the last any sensible person could expect to hear of it.

My acquaintance at the Embassy permitted himself an unusual degree of frankness: "At the moment, there are no facilities for travellers in the Soviet Central Asian Republics, and the frontier you wish to cross is generally regarded as closed." My card house seemed to be in danger of collapse before it had risen to a single storey.

Chance always plays a part in these affairs. What chance helped me I don't know, but to the surprise of

everybody concerned Moscow—already an individual with likes and dislikes, habits and a personal appearance—accorded me a transit visa.

Those officials who, through long residence in England, had been forced to the conclusion that as a race we enjoy discomfort and are averse to mental effort, regretted my exclusion from the earthly paradise visualised from different angles by Tamerlane and Stalin, not to mention the late Emir of Bokhara, who probably murdered more human beings with less reason than anybody else on earth, and Faisullah, President of an Asian Ireland in the shape of the new republic of Usbegistan at once—and dissidently—nationalist and Soviet. They said in effect: "It's a pity you won't be able to see anything you want to, but you can't say we've been unreasonable. You'll be able to spend a week in the train, and such a good train too——"

We talked a lot about trains. And—privately—I made all sorts of arrangements to avoid trains, for the right visa is a luxury I have rarely enjoyed. In fact, visas have always seemed to me much like chess, and I saw no reason why this one, permitting no more than six days between the Oxus and Moscow, should not be the basis of a prolonged campaign. It daunted me, however, to hear that I could not even receive the tenuous weapon represented by that word "transit" until I asked for it in Kabul. By that time I felt sure, Moscow, grim, grey and indifferent, would have forgotten all about me.

During my last week in England, the enlightened said to me: "Of course, Russia won't let you loose on her military frontier. It's sure to be bristling with war material. Why, it's the road to India, to Australia——" There was no end to their heated imagination.

The more perspicacious said: "They don't want you to be uncomfortable. They'd think it a fearfully bad advertisement for PROGRESS if you couldn't get a bath or enough to eat. And besides, they have an inferiority complex. They only want to show what they're certain you must approve."

A pillar of common sense announced—with truth, only I didn't recognise it at the time—"Once you get there, they won't bother about you at all."

Full of anticipation, I boarded a K.L.M. plane bound—in four days—from Amsterdam and a snowstorm to midsummer.

CHAPTER II

FLYING DUTCH

So few adventures are comfortable. According to el Raisuli, Prophet, Brigand, and Sultan of the Atlas mountains, "the world is as wide as man's imagination." On the whole, it is even more uncomfortable. For imagination fails before it arrives at the peculiar distressingness of guano tramps in the monsoon, or single fly-tents in a cloudburst. And there is always a hiatus between the mental state in which one leaves the ingenuity of civilisation—delectable food, cushioned transport and a continuous rush of hot water—and the entirely different point of view one acquires within twenty-four hours of reaching the particular wilderness which attracts by its lack of all accustomed comforts. For instance, the traveller who sulks at Victoria if he doesn't get at least two first-class seats to himself, will be content North of the Khyber Pass with a few square inches on the front bench of a lorry, crushed between driver and greaser, with petrol tins piled on his feet and somebody else's live stock on his knees.

The function of the K.L.M. air line is to continue what philosophers are apt to describe as "the illusion of civilisation" between Amsterdam and India or the islands of the Java Sea. I remember an enthusiastic passenger who made a habit of week-ending in Java, descending into the tropics, over his arm the fur coat in which he'd come aboard during a snowstorm at Le Bourget, and exclaiming: "Not a bump in nine thousand miles!" He pronounced it "boomp," which made it sound smoother than ever! And it occurred to me that, by flying across three continents, I had avoided all the "bumps," mental as well as physical, which fray the

edges of a journey. For in the air one is splendidly detached. If there is noise, one does not hear it. From the supreme relaxation of a seat that is, in the case of the K.L.M., all things to all men, including a bed if required, I could adjust myself to any view. I could look at the sky, thickly inhabited by clouds, or down at the swift succession of sea and land pouring gently under the wings. But nothing concerned me. I had no connection with the cities spread about the map with the effect of hastily-constructed patchwork.

Fields of glass—the hot-houses of Holland—gave way to a pattern of waterways. It looked as if somebody had tried embroidery and left the bright threads looped about the canvas. Mont Blanc, Avignon, and the Mediterranean—we flew so close to Monte Cristo that I could have tossed a pencil into the prison of Dumas's hero. The cupola of St. Peter's, a balloon bursting over Rome, the castle of St. Angelo squat beside the Tiber, and then colour began. The Apennines were red and white, the woods a glittering, dark green and the sea—purple split with islands. I leaned against the window, a trifle critical, as one is at a performance where the effects are too obvious. But when amber, fringed and frothed with crystal, showed rocks of Greece withheld from the waves, I found myself thinking in Byronic verse. "Burning Sappho" became more appropriate than T. S. Eliot. Yet the earth with its heaped and not very indicative colour, was decidedly reminiscent of those picture shows at which one hopes for the gift of tongues. The confusion of Picasso and the flagrance of Matisse, the massed solidity of Braques lay under our wings.

Athens, Corfu and the Mountain of Apollo—these were great names, but nothing short of Olympus could have satisfied me. Unconscious of the light shell which rode secure over the best possible sky-roads, I imagined the universe as malleable substance. Somewhere between the first and last days of creation, I looked down from heaven and found my work good. Except that there was too

much colour. I'd overdone the effect. The blue was impossible. Drenched in it, I went to sleep.

An extra blanket—why did they insist on so many coverings? "Breakfast," said a voice in my ear. Waking, I found we had landed at Helanan. The sun streamed over my knees. It was very hot.

So often, by camel or car, I had crossed the desert between Jerusalem or Damascus and Baghdad, but never before in the saddle of a sky racer, 6,000 feet above the leagues of sand.

From a seat beside the pilot I watched the dunes and the wadis, the crater-like cavities that had held up my first caravans, slip smooth as old scars over a slowly turning earth. There was no sense of movement. The plane hung suspended. After the grey beauty of Jerusalem, Baghdad sped to meet us, offering first the blazing dunes of Kazimein.

We landed with hardly a whisper on the sand. The Tigris looked like brown silk. It was New Year's Eve and I danced half the night at the Club—with Nuri Pasha, then Minister for War, and dear, fat Ja'afer, who beamed when he was asked to re-tell his war stories, how he fought for us and against us; but nine months later an assassin gave him no chance to fight. On that gay occasion Yasin Pasha, now in exile, was described as Iraq's strong man with an eye on Dictatorship, and the new kingdom already shewed signs of South-Americanisation. "Revolutions to come," said a politician wasted in opposition; "but I doubt if they will be much more important than your elections."

In darkness we drove to the aerodrome, and taking the night with us, we flew away towards Basra and the Gulf. Drawing the curtains and extinguishing my "bedside" light, I slept through the breadth of Persia.

When I woke, my fellow-passengers looked sleek and fed. "You've missed two meals," they said, "and such good ones."

But the Gulf with its theatrical red mountains heaped with snow, gave way to India and at Karachi there was the richest possible tea—or maybe a second lunch—and we were

off again, refreshed, renewed. That's what the sky does to us all. The days and years of our living take on new and correct proportions. Clouds bump against the window. The sun drifts companionably into the next seat. Higher still, and the earth disappears. Sunset is a furnace in which like Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego, we move unharmed. Far below a storm piles dark, tumultuous masses. But we are immune. Into the molten core, where day dissolves, we fly separated from everything but light. The elements have fused. There are no dimensions.

In an ecstasy of loneliness, I leaned above the sky.

A voice spoke. I imagined new commandments. "I've found another thermos, but I don't know if it's coffee or soup. Will you have some?"

Impossible, I'd thought, ever again to worry about visas, lorries, sheep-skin lined flea-bags, the diversity of Central Asian languages, or the attitude of officials. But with the smell of coffee—or was it soup?—I remembered that however far I flew—to the tinsel fragility of Burmah or the iridescence of Bangkok, to the islands of illusion upon which the Dutch, best colonial administrators after the Romans, have imposed sufficient but satisfactorily impalpable sophistication, I should have to come back to Jodhpur.

For there I would set out—the adventure in comfort ended, the magnificent K.L.M. plane, a triple-engined Douglas already far on its enchanted way East, while I went North.

CHAPTER III

INDIAN KALEIDOSCOPE

INDIA has really nothing to do with this tale. But during the few weeks I waited for the Afghan snows to melt so that the new track across the Hindu Kush might be negotiable by lorry, I wandered between industrial towns such as Calcutta and Cawnpore and the native states. I stayed in cantonments and occasionally with Indian friends whose hospitality was unbounded. In so short a time, I could learn nothing of more than personal interest, but I received a few vivid impressions which contributed to my Afghan-Russian journey in that they provided points of contrast. For instance, I had always taken for granted that the British in India and the French in North Africa, had been right in refusing to interfere with the social or religious customs of the countries they ruled. As a corollary then, Russia had been, to say the least of it, mistaken in imposing, by force, European habits upon her Asian peoples. What could she give them in return for the faith she had destroyed?

But these cut and dried views were shaken long before I reached Kabul, last stronghold of feudal Islam, or Tashkent, where Lenin is the greatest of the Prophets and Voroshiloff the Tamerlane of the future.

I remember an evening in Lahore. In the house of a well-known lawyer, we discussed the eternal question of Indian rights and Indian motives. The hostess wore a primrose sari and talked the English of Oxford. She was exquisite and believed in compromises. Probably she will be elected to Congress and become a pillar of national liberalism. Her daughter, irrational and magnificent, had no use for anything but extremes. She mocked at security and regarded the British troops as an army of occupation.

She said: "In a hundred years, could you have given us nothing but peace? Did we ask you for peace? Has Europe got it? Did America have it? Is the peace you've imposed on us sufficient to cover our lack of growth? What have you really done for India? Women still work seventeen hours a day in the mills.* Children who should be at school are employed for a pittance in the carpet factories. In the country, the people starve. I went yesterday to a village where the women were gathering weeds to make soup. They were scarecrows wrapped in rags. In the towns, there is no work. You will not allow us new industries for fear of interfering with your own. Education, yes, but no employment. One in ten, one in a hundred of those who crowd the colleges have any hope of a job."

The girl subsided on to a sofa. Her eyes were dark flames. I imagined a light behind her pallor. She was burning away—in complete impotence.

A young member of Congress spoke deprecatingly. He said: "It is not all the fault of the British. For years I've been trying to get a Wages Bill passed. It has been thrown out again and again—by Indians. Do you realise, this is the only country in the world where industrial wages are paid monthly? The artisan cannot live on nothing for the first four weeks, so he goes to the moneylender, with the result that he remains in his debt for ever. But the big industrialists won't hear of a change. They've got the power and they mean to use it."

The conversation ceased to have much meaning when we talked of unity. It was a Moslem house, but Hindus were present. The women shewed their faces, but the older ones still wore the elaborate and lovely clothes familiar to the zenana. Their nails and hair were henna-ed. They took snuff. Their manners were charming and they seemed to me to possess characters, if not minds, which were precise, composed, and detached.

* There has been a legal 60-hour week for some time. This year the working week has been reduced to 52 hours.

The young people, less elegant, but indescribably ardent, argued with force, intelligence and a bitter sense of inferiority.

From Calcutta to Peshawar, I found the same tragic complex—heritage of the frustrated years during which India knew herself helpless. This consciousness of inferiority is as serious a barrier between England and India as the purdah with which—rightly or wrongly—we have never attempted to interfere. The majority of Indian women are still helpless behind the veil, and the men forced into exaggerated opposition by the consciousness of inequality.

What have we done in India to make the people *feel* so illogically oppressed? In Central Asia, Russia has slaughtered by the thousand. She has, broadly speaking, eliminated religion, tradition and the most cherished social customs. She has imposed—by force—completely new living and working conditions upon peoples who detested any innovation and to whom change was a deadly sin. Yet there is no bitter resentment between Russians and Usbegs or Tadjiks. The younger generation may be mildly nationalist, but they are anxious to work with their Soviet advisers. Imitative and confident, they visualise the same goal as the race by which they were once conquered and are now, in effect, ruled.

For me, the Indian kaleidoscope presented an infinity of facets. I remember the big native states as pages torn from an illuminated missal, centuries old. Colour, ignorance, prodigality and frustration seemed to me equally represented. In one palace, said to contain 3,000 women, I visited a wife who had come three or four years ago from a more modern state. I found her in a small room with slits of windows, heavily screened, some two feet below the roof. It occurred to me that the girl might as well have been blind. Perhaps she would have been happier so.

Together, we walked upon a roof. It was bounded by high walls. We could see a patch of sky, and through a marble grille, intricately carved, fragments of the court

below, where occasionally somebody passed. In an attempt to see an inch or two more, the girl who was seventeen, and had borne "a daughter who just lives, and two sons who are dead," crushed herself so close to the marble that she bruised her flesh. Leaning beside her, half blinded by the screen, with its mouldings cold against my skin, I caught something of her terror. We looked at each other with faces equally white. In her eyes was an agony of foreboding. This was the imprisonment for life imposed upon desperate criminals, but with the "hard labour" that might be a relief, reduced to the bearing—in ignorance and an extremity of pain—of children who could not live.

At Benares I drifted down the holy river in a motor-boat. Nothing could have been more inapposite. From the twentieth century I looked back a thousand years or so. Bulls decorated with marigolds wandered about the temple steps. They were very thin and looked as if Faith provided insufficient nourishment. Crowds stood knee-deep, waist-deep in the water washing away their dirt and their sins. Occasionally they stopped to drink. On the ghats burned the funeral pyres. I saw the emaciated body of a Saddhu covered with flowers and flies as the centre piece of a group who seemed to be engaged upon their morning meal. The dead man interfered not at all with their appetites.

I saw several full-grown corpses, stiff as boards, consigned to the flames, and the sight was not particularly disturbing because rigidity and yards of white cotton stuff had robbed the bodies of their humanity. But suddenly I saw a large man, shaved and garbed as a widower, with a girl in his arms. Her slender brown feet dangled under the proud red of her married woman's shroud. Soft and supple she lay against the shoulder of her husband. One arm hung down. It was childishly round. Bracelets glittered on the wrist, and I noticed a ring sheathing one of the bare toes that curved gently like a petal about to close. There was nothing stiff about the body. I imagined at any moment the girl might put down her

golden-brown feet and wriggle herself free of the red stuff. She would be lovely, of course—and so young.

"She's not dead at all!" I said to my companion.

But he was not imaginative. "Oh, I expect she is——"

"How d'you know?" I asked, trying to remember about rigor mortis.

"How can anybody know—except her husband? There's no death certificate here."

In Benares, also, I saw one of the largest colleges in the world. It seemed to me much larger than anything in England, or America. Its buildings spread over miles of country. They were devoted to every form of science. There were agricultural and chemical faculties, schools of medicine, art, and engineering. I do not know how many thousand students received practical and theoretical education in this city of fruitless learning, but I talked with many who were certain of their degrees and uncertain of everything else. With European coats and every variety of white nether garment, with shirts inside and outside their trousers, according to their age or national precepts, they rode dangerously on bicycles and talked dangerously because, subconsciously, they knew there was nothing else for them to do.

India has had too much education and a surfeit of politics. She doesn't need any more lawyers. She wants thousands of good, sound farmers contented to live on the land, and artisans prepared to begin at the bottom and learn their particular business. She has too many university-educated clerks who want to be ministers, and are in the meantime politicians. She suffers from altogether too much opposition.

After a month in the North, it seemed to me that every hour was compounded of opposition and every mouth voiced it. Moslems and Hindus, natural enemies but superficially reconciled, intrigued each to prevent the others securing or holding appointments. Men successfully opposed women and girls, college-educated again, Christian or atheist, who opposed their inadequate strength

to the monumental brutality of the zenana system which wastes one half of the human race and jeopardises the future of the other half. British officials, honestly exhausted, opposed any innovation which might jeopardise their sorely tried careers and a C.S.I. at the end of them. Indians—on principle—opposed everything, everywhere, at once. For the majority, Suraj meant the same as Sinn Fein. "For myself alone" and "by myself" as well. For the minority, the problems of stagnant agriculture, frustrated industry, middle-class unemployment, the tyranny of the feudal states and the violent but inept nationalism of the terrorists, were too complicated for constitutional solution. Dreamers of great dreams, sincere and disappointed, Moscow represented their only hope. With the best will in the world they considered imposing an idealistic communism, not only on the peasants who would submit —as they have submitted—to any disaster, but on a collection of dissident and fiercely possessive peoples, their egos inflamed by unproductive education.

Delhi closes the road to Russia because Indian students would go there in blinkers; but if, clear-eyed, they could be sent to the Steppes and the Volga, they would realise that Soviet Socialism, dependent as it is on the maintenance of a mechanical mass spirit, is the one institution which only conquest could impose on India.

In fact, there is just one link between Indian Nationalists and the oligarchy who from the Kremlin rule a sixth of the world's surface. That is a persecution complex—the pride of the one and the terror of the other.

When I reached Peshawar—a trifle jaundiced no doubt, because the only sense left to me after so many conflicting impressions was an appreciation of my profound and lasting ignorance based on the fact that I could not make up my mind about anything, least of all the new constitution, nor could I wholly approve or disapprove any attitude I had hitherto encountered except that of a few disillusioned, but grandly disinterested British administrators—well, when I arrived at Peshawar, which is really the beginning of

Central Asia, it seemed to me there was no link at all between the two races of whom it is said that one *has* exploited India and that the other, equally alien to a large portion of the continent, is about to do so even more thoroughly. The British were isolated in cantonments. The Indians were immured in the Bazaar. Government House attempted to bridge the gap. A few of the liberal-minded followed suit. But in Peshawar, as in Rawal Pindi, it was impossible for the ordinary traveller to avoid the impression of military occupation. For a Tory it would be equally impossible to evade the conviction that barracks have done more for the good of India than colleges and parliaments.

In the dark continent where nationalism and imperialism, superstition and science, the extremes of poverty and wealth, colour a mass of personal ambitions, where every Indian seems to be suspicious and the majority of Britons either puzzled, indignant, or disappointed, I met two men whose personalities were independent of their positions. One was a Rajput, and the other a Parsee. I stayed with the first in a small palace built by Akbar in the middle of the jungle. It stood on the edge of a lake in which the towers were reflected. The place was a sanctuary for bird and beast. Sambur strolled along the terrace. Duck covered the water. Herons stood motionless upon the bank. At sunset a tiger might come to drink.

In a pavilion of red sandstone, with the lake on one side and the jungle on the other, we used to talk for hours about such subjects as the Hindu religion and re-incarnation, or about the habits of the wild animals whom the Maharajah treated as children.

Life was simple and gracious. There were few servants, most of them old. Aides-de-camp and secretaries wore sombre clothes with turbans the colour of the sand. The little palace dreamed, silent at the end of a causeway. At mid-day the reflections of the pagodas dwindled into crimson blots. In the evening they stretched across the water in shafts of flame.

Sometimes we drove across the sunburned country to look at a new dyke, a swamp reclaimed, or land in process of being irrigated. The revenues of the state were devoted to such schemes. There was no suggestion of pomp. But when we entered a village, its single street lined with clean mud houses, the porches carved and painted, the whole population turned out with shining faces. They shouted themselves hoarse and poured fruit, flowers, any small object they might possess into the car. It was as if the sun shone for them, suddenly, out of a dark sky. I'd never seen such pleasure except on the faces of children at their first Christmas tree.

The other Indian who, for me, stood out above his fellows, was a merchant and a traveller, but his journeys were done by means of a fecund imagination. He possessed the best collection of travel-books I've seen out of a public library or a museum, and he had read them all. His shop in a busy street was stocked with groceries and dry goods. His lorries solved the transport problems of the Khyber. He had a reputation for shrewd common sense and reliability. It seemed to me that whenever anybody was in difficulties they went to the small, slight man in spectacles who immediately provided a solution. He was post office and confessional combined; for, rare among Indians and Irish, he had a sense of humour as opposed to the more common quality of wit.

Having bought stores for Kabul and arranged for a front seat on a lorry, I was invited to tea in a long room lined with books. There was a daughter who had inherited some of her father's charm. I think she was going to be a singer or a teacher of music. A young doctor joined us and we deserted the comfortable English chairs to kneel on the floor by the book-cases. With Hakluyt or Aurel Stein in our hands, with our minds wandering between Thibet and the Arabian deserts, we talked about India. And I was humiliated by the implication that our points of view must necessarily be different.

The arrogance, or the subservience, of politicians was

gone, but the men who sat among tiers of books and treated them as lovers, accepted the chasm which I had hoped imaginary. "There is no middle way," they said. "We don't want security. We want independence. We don't even want to be what you call well ruled. We want to rule ourselves."

One who had fought in France, said: "We shall make the hell of a lot of mistakes, but they'll be our own mistakes. Have you noticed how accustomed one grows to one's own faults—they are familiar and comfortable." I thought that the adjectives represented all that is lacking in the mental state of India. For, during the last seventeen years, the word "reform" has been applied by all parties to political rather than to social conditions.

CHAPTER IV

PESHAWAR—ON THE ROOFS

FROM the roof of the Gor Khatri I looked at the mud sky-scrapers heaped together and leaning one against another. The top storeys, walled with galvanised iron, clay, or matting, were open to the skies. It was as if the lids had been taken off an untidy pile of boxes. Each of them contained some odds and ends of life.

Immediately below me a woman with arrogant hips lay upon a couch made of rope. Her hair hung uncombed in the dust. Her blue robe moulded her figure. An older woman with rags for a body and a face of waste paper sat staring at nothing. Wisps stood up from her forehead. Smoke from a brazier blew across her feet.

In the next box a man with an astrakhan cap pushed on to the back of his head sewed diligently at a pair of night-blue trousers. His spectacles hung crooked on his forehead. The heavy silk ballooned from his hands. It was embroidered with stars and its opulence contrasted with the threadbare appearance of the tailor. I imagined a bride wearing those trousers with slippers of real silver curved into half moons at the toes.

Further away a slight figure revolved in an endless pattern. I could just see a flower behind the ear. The skirts of a coat swung out. I had an impression of paint and jewels. "It's a boy——" said the Pathan at my elbow, and he leaned upon the parapet in a tumult of white draperies. There was a great deal of him and I wondered how soon he would crash down upon the heap of boxes and whether they would crumple like cardboard underneath him.

Beyond the city, crushed and clambering upwards between its walls, a froth of almond blossom spattered

across the plain. Flushed and indecisive the orchards spread towards the hills and these were raw blue or covered with snow. Beyond them lay Afghanistan, Chitral on the way to China and unadministered tribal territory. From them came Wazirs and Mahsuds, mighty fighters who above everything else enjoy the speech of their rifles, Afridis, Mohmands, and Shinwaris, driven by hunger from their lean hills, looking upon the plains as their store-cupboards. But into the mountains go the new roads, symbols of that "peaceful penetration" of which the politicians dream. The roads are British property. On them murder is a crime punishable under the laws of civilisation. A yard to the right, a yard to the left, the assassin can relieve his feelings or perform his duty with a blood feud as the consequence. The mountains are no man's land, and they look it.

CHAPTER V

PESHAWAR—IN THE BAZAAR

In the Street of Dentists, where mouths in paint and plaster and the awful models of mouths magnified to the proportions of a nightmare gape and grin from the doorways, I met a friend. He came from Bokhara and he wore a padded pale blue coat over tight-fitting trousers and gaiters ending in crescent shoes. His face was completely hairless. It appeared to have been newly polished. On its smoothness the spectacles looked as if they had been painted, and the neat, closely-rolled turban adhered to the head as an afterthought. We were very pleased to see each other, for we had last conversed in Yezd, which is far away, being the city of the Zoroastrians, commonly called the Fire-Worshippers. After prolonged greetings, "May you never be tired——" "May the sun shine upon your sons——" we walked together through the city. It is a very strange one.

We passed between the money-changers in their carpeted booths with the coins of the world heaped about their feet, and the space where the beggars congregate, colourless and tattered, remnants of men misshapen, with no possessions but the poverty that links them one to another and causes them to lie close together in the dust. Some of them were picking lice from the refuse in which they were, not clothed, but partially covered. One, more naked than his fellows, took some trouble to replace upon his body any parasites that left it, whether for warmth, or holiness, I do not know.

We paused to speak to a scholar with a long beard. Seated upon the ground with a horn for an inkpot, he was writing a letter for a tribesman who clung to a friend's hand while he dictated and licked his lips and sweated.

He seemed to be greatly afraid, in spite of the frontier medal on his chest and the yard or so of knife stuck into his trousers, but the scholar, without expression, wrote in slow, beautiful strokes that curved about the page. Tenderly he made dots and dashes, and the ivory of his skin exactly matched the parchment over which he leaned.

We passed through the Street of the Story-tellers where crowds gathered to indulge in the physical pleasures of oratory second only to those of love and war, and through the Street of the Singing-birds, walled with cages from which came desperate and beautiful sounds.

We saw two men walking together with their fingers interlocked. One of them had a rose behind his ear. They were magnificent men, from the hills, the muscles cording under their open shirts, their eyes wind-burned and steady. They smiled upon the edge of laughter, and their teeth blazed across the darkness of their skins. Friendship was a fine thing and they flaunted it.

We observed, in all the concourse of men, townsmen in multitudinous white, tribesmen with black cloths wound round their heads and earth-coloured blankets across their shoulders, one woman walking alone. Nothing of her could be seen, or imagined, except her feet, scarcely brown and very slender, between heelless slipper and anklet. Under the tent of her burqa, with its mesh across the eyes, she moved smooth, secret, and unconcerned. Nobody could touch her. Her own husband wouldn't know her. Enjoying to the full the privileges of anonymity, she moved from booth to booth, and even when she asked the price of silks her voice was without individuality.

We entered the Street of the Potters and my friend spoke gently of the thousand sins of Peshawar, of charras coming down in the pack-saddles of camels from Sinkiang and the hemp-growing districts in Western China; of a serai where the scented figures in women's dress, rouged, with eyebrows plucked and painted, with gold in their nostrils and their ears, had once been men; of eunuchs who grew rich in business of which they did not talk; of

cocaine hidden in one among the hundreds of jars ranged on shelf upon shelf above the street, of gangsters who used axes instead of guns. He said, "These are the secrets of Peshawar, but they are secrets all men know——" and he turned into a lane so narrow that it could not hold the day. In the late afternoon it was already dark. Doors opened straight into the stream of passers and these eddied on uncertain feet. For behind each door was a bed, conspicuously white and frilled. Against the pillows reclined, always in the same attitude, a woman soberly dressed. Between her brows flared the red mark of Vishnu. Her eyes had been elongated with paint, her lips and gums reddened. I did not see a movement. Still as an image, each woman stared at the crowd, drew them to her, dismissed them. . . .

"They get themselves murdered," said my friend without emotion. "Two, three in a night, sometimes. There are many murders in Peshawar. There are too many people——"

We passed another Moslem woman, a white tent walking quietly. I wondered if she enjoyed her privacy, if it amused her to be a secret in the publicity of Peshawar. She dawdled. She turned to look at me. I imagined she smiled, contemptuous perhaps of the freedom she had no desire to share.

CHAPTER VI

PESHAWAR—IN A MERCHANT'S HOUSE

ABOVE the street we sat, with carpets from Central Asia covering the floor, and some primrose yellow water-pipes ranged along the walls. The front of the room opened on to a balcony with nothing to shield it from the crowd whose heads passed just below. I could have plucked a turban, an ear-ring, or the rose from a tribesman's cropped hair. A tree leaned above a comparatively open space, and under it a preacher had spread his rug and was reading from a book he knew by heart. He turned the pages without looking at them, while a disciple waved a fly-whisk made of yaks' tails over his head. Others gathered to hear wisdom and some brought gifts of flowers. Chains of jasmine and blue cinerarias, the heads of daisies and marigolds, were piled on the faded yellow rug. From the street of the silversmiths came the incessant clang of hammers. Across the square a knife-cleaner from Turkestan was whittling away at a blade. Behind him a fruit-seller, melon-faced, shining as if with the juice of his wares, sat on a shelf, crumpled into the smallest possible space between the floods of oranges, apples and guavas which poured from roof to floor. It was a lovely rush of colour, and it was repeated by neighbouring booths so that the whole side of the square seemed to be painted in fiercest reds and yellows. And the paint was leaving the canvas. It rolled down in great blobs and could not be restrained by the fruit-like figures, russet or lemon or plum brown, wrinkled as rind, or with the bloom of peaches on their skins, squatting in half-empty baskets and eating as often as not bananas, unsaleable on account of over-ripeness.

"Peshawar is the market of Central Asia," said my

Bokharan friend. "It is Paris, it is New York, it is Samarkand. It is all famous cities. If you wait here long enough you will meet everyone——"

A Thibetan, the ear-flaps of his hat turned up and lined with fur, paused below the balcony. In spite of the sunshine he wore several coats. His pack contained merchandise, pottery, images of Buddha, and silk. Round his neck, on a chain, he carried a metal shrine with the portrait of a Lama inside. His flat shoes made no sound. A smile spread over his unwashed face. "You are a great man," he said to my friend. "Buy some of my cups, eight pennies are nothing to you." The smile became distracting. It suggested a child to whom nothing had been refused.

And then some guests came in. One was a merchant from the neighbourhood of Ferghana, east of Tashkent, between Russian and Chinese Turkestan. He was a Moslem, but he had no beard, and when he had established himself upon a chair, he looked a stranger to his feet. They were small, as if they had not been much used, and he kept curling them round the legs of the chair, higher and higher, so that he might be comforted by having them within reach. He had an explosion of hair above his eyes, so that they were almost hidden, and a big, bold nose that went well with the berry-brown darkness of his skin. He had left the Soviet Republics because of the persecution of Islam. He said, "They destroyed the mosques. They told us we could go our own ways, but there was only one way to go and it led to the co-operative and the collective farm. I am too old to go back to school."

By this time an Afghan from Kabul had added himself to the party. He traded in caracul skins, and he was a fine figure of a man with dark, smooth hair, and a ripeness of eyelid and mouth that told of good humour.

The three men talked of Islam. The Afghan said, "You will find Islam the key of my country. There it is not only the poor who are religious. Not a great man, but interrupts his day for the five prayers. We are not

civilised perhaps"— he threw out the words as a boast— "but we have faith."

"It is true," agreed my friend from Bokhara. "Independence and Islam—that is Afghanistan." And in an aside, he added: "The bogeys of the British on the frontier. When they attack the one, they find themselves confronted by the other!"

The Afghan shifted his excellent proportions upon the hard seat covered with a carpet from Merv. He said, "Islam was not strong enough to stand against Russia north of the Oxus. It had disappeared like dust in winter——"

The merchant from Ferghana interrupted: "In Kabul your intellectuals have kept their religion, but with us it belonged only to the people. When the Mullahs were driven away we were without leaders. The wisest among us had given our wisdom to trade. We could not teach. All we could do was to run away, and in such manner preserve what was left to us." He spoke with humour rather than bitterness, and I imagined that he had sought a market as much as a mosque in Peshawar.

In the pause that followed I ventured on a question. "Since Russia is avowedly the enemy of Islam, whereas England looks upon the Moslems in India as her best friends, why," I asked the Afghan, "are your countrymen inclined to be even more suspicious of us than of the Soviet?"

With tact and politeness, the dealer in furs protested. "Bolshevism is as foreign to Islam as——" he hesitated for a simile. His hands sought inspiration in the recesses of his garments. "As pockets—pockets to a lion!"

The Bokharan permitted himself a smile. "Yet there is always the Jhelam river," and he explained: "To the Afghan the Jhelam, far down in the plains of Punjab, is the true boundary of his country. You are the usurpers. So too, of course, are the Sikhs, and a number of other peoples, but you are the head and arms of the usurpation and each year you push further into the mountains."

The Afghan and the exile from Ferghana became involved in conversation. A youth who had hitherto been silent, said, "I, also, am from Kabul," and he said it splendidly as if there could be no other place. I sympathised with him. So should one feel about one's capital.

"What do you do?" I asked.

"I am a manager in a boot-factory." Pride deepened his voice.

"How many pairs of boots do you make in a day?"

The young man mentioned so fabulous a number that I had no words left. When he was out of hearing, the Bokharan explained to me. "It is a parable. Don't you understand? The tale of boots: very likely the factory itself is what the boy hopes for his country, not what actually exists. He did not mean to lie. He spoke of what he sees in his mind and what he firmly believes can be, indeed must be some day." In silence I drank tea flavoured with herbs. In silence I meditated on speech which, if it hid facts and disguised thought, expressed a patriotic hope.

CHAPTER VII

THE KOHAT PASS

WITH an Indian in the Frontier Constabulary, I drove across the Peshawar plain. Storms had wrought havoc with its silken green. The wheat drooped. The mud ramparts of the villages had been breached. The watch-towers looked uncertain. Only the mountains, painted against a colourless sky, remained formidable because in this particular light, rain-washed, they appeared entirely undimensional. It was difficult to believe that anyone had crossed them, or that they were not, in themselves, the end of a world. That morning the mountains were final.

On the plea of protecting Peshawar City from sudden, unheralded occupation by tribesmen in search of a square meal or a day's sport, pickets had been pushed out on to the plain. We could see their camps as white splashes in the prevailing mud.

The Indian regaled me with information and ideas. He said, "The Afridi raids the Wazir because he needs excitement. What else has he to do? Look at the villages when we cross unadministered territory. The man is sitting in a café with his rifle. He is strolling along a road in conversation with a friend. Both have their rifles. It is the women who do all the work. They are expensive. An Afridi may pay five hundred rupees for a wife—when rifles were worth more than they are to-day, when the trade from the Persian Gulf was at its height, a bride cost as much as two thousand rupees, but she does everything, even the ploughing."

We passed a barrier and drove on into a valley between barren hills. Here all the men were armed and the villages fortified. Watch-towers dominated the solid

mud walls. Each family group secured itself against its neighbours by the thickness of its building and a singular lack of doors.

"Here by the road it is very civilised," explained my companion. How often, and how laboriously that adjective is used in India, and what conditions it denotes. "There are murders, of course, but they are no affair of ours. A man can kill his wife's lover, if he chooses—that is his business and respectable enough, providing he kills the wife first, but generally he only cuts off her nose. That puts an end to it anyway."

It would be difficult, I agreed, to play Helen or Messalina without a nose.

The mountains, arid as cardboard and comparably featureless, inspired my companion. He said, "It is with these roads you are conquering the tribes"—I was sorry he said "you" not "we"—"but you've got to give them work. They must eat, and in the old days they ate what the plains produced. It was the easiest sort of work to loot. The roads are spreading ideas—and needs. It is needs that are civilising, providing you can fulfil them in any way but with a rifle. If you can make the Pathan want comfort, he'll begin to trade. Look at this village. It is prosperous enough because it makes arms."

In the shadow of the pass we left the car, and were hospitably welcomed by a headman who must surely find it amusing to show complacent Britons the manufacture of rifles which are going to be used against them.

In a shed, its walls crumbled by the recent rains, under a roof sagging like the humps of a thirsty camel, half a dozen men, one of them blind, were turning barrels on instruments which looked as if a good many of their component parts were missing. "It is all stolen steel," said the headman, in matter-of-fact tones. "They have to go as far as Lahore for it sometimes, and mostly it's from the railway. If the bolt or the trigger's British, it doubles the price. The locally made trigger is apt to get too hot and soften after a dozen or so shots. It's all right for a

local scrap, or a blood feud where a man doesn't want to go on firing, but it's not much good in a war."

So spoke a cultivated man in English, and after he had shown us a mud yard, dishevelled by storm, but full of rifles and the stocks and barrels of rifles, he gave us tea. The tray came from Birmingham, the tea-pot from Sheffield, the cups and the cloth from Japan. "More sugar? A cigarette? What did you ask—the price of rifles? Thirty-two rupees with the name of a British firm on the barrel. I can show you the stamps. You couldn't tell the finished article from the army pattern. It is identical. But, as I say, if you want the real thing, every part British—stolen from an arsenal—except the stock and barrel of course, well then it costs over a hundred, and it'll last a lifetime."

"Is the supply equal to the demand?" I asked. I had noticed some Wazirs, earth-coloured as to skins and clothes, with black hair cut straight across the neck, gorgeous as to teeth and superlatively featured, waiting outside.

"It depends on the season. The tribesmen say the English make war in the summer when they've no other use for their time. Their wives have gone. It's a close season for duck. So they make week-end wars."

"Oh," I said. There wasn't anything else to say. Civilisation from the wrong end—or at least the unusual end—of the telescope—a salutary vision!

The Indian who had come with me said, "It's a question of habit. The tribesman has always fought, he thinks of a 'lovely new war' as profit combined with excitement. But now some of the Wazirs, who used to be the worst fighters of all, except perhaps the Mahsuds, are driving their own lorries. They've turned themselves into mechanics and captured most of the transport up to Wana."

Wana is a mud fort crouched in a tangle of barbed wire, forbidden, very much forbidden to the unofficial.

"And the broadcasting—that is very clever," interpolated the headman. "They are beginning to get it in the villages and the old men are furious because they can't argue with it. The other night I heard a discussion,

in Pushtu of course, as to whether the old times or the new were best and a Khan shouted himself hoarse in an effort to convince the loud-speaker of its errors."

The headman's eyes wrinkled at the corners and the smile spread to his lips. He wore European clothes and a turban winged like a white butterfly. He had a neat face, with features suitably matched. Only his voice was of the country. Deep and sensitive, it made the best use of words. "Moral uplift," he said with amusement and appreciation. "It is a new weapon and at present double-edged." He told a story popular in Peshawar. An enthusiastic Pathan was listening to a lecture on the wireless. The subject was the prevention of murder, for Authority has long been disturbed by the prevalence of unwarranted corpses, and the necessity for dealing with them immediately after morning coffee. The Pathan was interested in the new view of assassination propounded by the voice in the trumpet, but a friend asked questions, "What is it all about? I do not understand."

"Be quiet. It is telling of how to stop murder—be quiet, I say."

The friend persisted in his interruptions. Exasperated, the Pathan knifed him and continued to listen to the propaganda concerned with the prevention of murder.

We thanked the headman for his excellent tea. We went out among brown-skinned tribesmen bargaining for the means of pursuing their natural avocation. We heard that the Mohmands who surprised the Guides last autumn had not "yet had enough." We heard there had been a lashkar of Afghans with them who enjoyed defying their own government and adding to the problems of frontier administration.

"It is natural for Moslems to fight together," said a vastly-bearded personage, so loosely put together that he looked like the remains of an earthquake. His bones were obvious and unsettled. The joints seemed to have little connection one with the other and the whole of him was wrapped in white surmounted by a plaid blanket.

We heard the King of Afghanistan described as the Badsha—the Father of Islam. My Indian friend took trouble to explain how this belief adds to the difficulties of the Government in Kabul. For however determinedly the Afghan authorities oppose the inclinations of the frontier tribes, these are loath to discard old habits of raiding into India and it is naturally difficult for them to understand why their own Badsha no longer helps Moslem brothers in their mountains threatened by the infidel.

By the time I had listened to the last "They are saying——" interpreted by the headman, I saw the Frontier as full of prickles as a porcupine. I tried the simile on my companion as we drove back—because according to legend, the spines of this particular beast are invisibly barbed. If they once get into your flesh, they fester and you can't pull them out.

The Indian who had done a good deal both of fighting and of thinking, and who, by means of both, had contrived to co-relate his loyalties, replied, "At least, there is no Communism in Peshawar. Perhaps this is the only province in India where Communism has no hold. The people have learned their lesson from the refugees who poured in from Turkestan."

So—in imagination—I saw the Oxus as the frontier between the two great socialist systems, Bolshevism and Islam. The beginning and the end of human law is contained in them. Islam proved strong enough to overthrow Amanullah, individualist and experimentalist, in Afghanistan, but it had not been able to compete with the reforms imposed by Russia on the republics of Central Asia. A matter of colouring, I thought, for Amanullah's changes were pale compared with the deep red with which, between Kokhand and Bokhara, the newer Socialism has covered the traces of the older.

CHAPTER VIII

INVISIBILITY IN THE KHYBER

CARDBOARD brown hills flat against the skyline! Hills that had shape without bulk, and where the rock faces showed, the cardboard was stained and darkened. The first thing I noticed about the Khyber was the lack of detail. Black goats, the black dresses of women, the entrances to caves and blockhouses showed up against the prevailing browns, but only for a few yards. Then they merged into the general formlessness. White animals, stones bleached in the sunlight, an unnaturally clean turban, were momentarily obvious, but soon they too became invisible.

Anything that moved on the mountains was without individuality. It might be animal or human. Earth-coloured donkeys, camels, shaggy as the dried bushes among which they trod, men's faces, their clothes and the bundles they carried were indistinguishable from the surrounding sand and rock. No wonder aeroplanes are of little use against the invisibility with which the hills protect their own. At five hundred feet, it would be difficult for an observer to pick out as many tribesmen ambushed on an apparently barren summit.

The ranges of Abyssinia offer less cover, because their colouring is more variegated and the Amharan warrior fighting the Italians, was, in many cases, as much a stranger to the mountains as his enemy. Where the tribesman of the North-West frontier feels secure on the least hospitable crag, the Abyssinian is apt to see in the same circumstances, a desperate refuge, or a trap sprung by the hostility of nature. The Frontier tribesmen of India rank with the

Photo,

The author at the barrier on the Indian-Afghan frontier in the Khyber Pass.

ibesmen in the Khyber Pass. The gunsmith is in front of the arms factory in the Kohat the North-West Frontier.

Druses and the Riffs. They are born fighters, to whom war is as natural a taste as eating and drinking, and a great deal less difficult to satisfy. The Abyssinian peasants, on the contrary, are more or less synthetic fighters. They are brave enough, but their rifles are part of the normal, masculine adornment. They cannot possibly be good at guerrilla warfare, because to them the next valley, the next range, is "foreign country" and as such, full of undesirable possibilities.

Thinking in this fashion as I drove between the cardboard ramparts of the Khyber, I began to understand why Italy had advanced so quickly through Tigre and Tembien. She was fighting the country, but not the people of the country, for no Abyssinian villager belongs to his arid strip of soil as the North-West tribesman does to the stones which give him shelter in war and a hard sustenance in peace.

The Khyber flaunts the difficulties of passage. At the first barrier, lorries red, green, and nondescript, waited for permits. Camels wound themselves into their usual inextricable confusion. It is, I think, a game played upon the system of "follow my leader" in which the first of the string, roped head to tail, treads the pattern that the others hurry to imitate. Bales of washing ballooned from the sides of a water buffalo: in fact only the tail, twisted in protest, and the great curved horns, were visible. Tongas behaved like midges, irritating the concourse with perpetual movement. From the turret of an armoured car appeared a helmet and a khaki-clad arm. Donkeys blundered against the mud walls of the fort which dominated the scene, and, upon a notice board, a painted motor, very long in the bonnet, indicated the route for petrol-driven traffic, while a dromedary, followed by an animal vaguely equine, encouraged caravans to take a more direct path.

In the Pass the road slipped, smooth as oiled silk, under our wheels. A savage wind tore at the screen. It had already tattered the flags flying above the posts at Shagai

and Landi Kotl. Now it turned the black burqas of the women into sails. It drove the goats scuttering up the hills and caused the tribesmen to bury themselves in their blankets, so that they looked like bundles with rifle barrels protuding from the centres.

Afridi, Mohmand, Zakhar Kheil, and Shinwari, each of them carried a rifle, much as a well-dressed man in London takes a walking-stick to complete the picture he has of himself. For there is peace on the road. A matter of form, as well as custom, but then everything is "form," Rolls Royces in England, shock-workers' badges in Russia, and the steel bracelets worn by Sikhs.

The only men I saw unarmed in the Khyber were the Punjabis stationed at Shagai. Tall and admirably built, they swung down the road with a frieze of mules, their hands empty, their hair capped about their heads and a gash of white as each man smiled at the passing car.

Above us, on suitable eminences, the blockhouses grew out of decidedly tired barbed wire, but it is only intended to stop rifle thieves. The windows were protected by loopholed metal shields. The sole means of ingress was by a ladder. On the roofs, sentries armed with field-glasses and notebooks, surveyed the road on which the lorries must have looked like beetles, and the mountains whose secrets could be kept against more pertinacious enquiry.

The Khyber is something of a fraud. If its cardboard hills are rock, its visible defences are intended against nothing more serious than snipers and rifle thieves. The square, red fort at Shagai is a convenient shelter for mobile property which the tribesmen covet, but it is commanded by at least one peak and all that is—or might be—invisible below the sky-line. The camp of Landi Kotl, querulous with barbed wire, extending tentacles in the shape of forts and telegraph wires on to the nearest heights, would not be too happily placed in the event of war. But, if the tribesmen rose in mass, nobody would bother about the

walls and wire which impress the imaginative traveller. The defenders of the Khyber—six battalions against how many of the 240,000 nomads in unadministered territory? —would take to trenches, and these are as invisible on the brown hills as the riflemen and the goats, the caves wherein whole families live like badgers, and the bundles of firewood destined for unseen hearths.

CHAPTER IX

POLICY ON THE AFGHAN-INDIAN FRONTIER

NORTH of the Khyber, the land is unchanged. The last British fort, Char Bagh, stands—four square and solid—on a rock below the summit of the pass. Thence, poplars, tenuous as ghosts, march down to the Afghan plains.

The barrier passed, and the road no longer smooth macadam, I reflected on the incongruity of frontiers. For Afghanistan provides our longest foreign border. Eight hundred miles of her land adjoins territory controlled or influenced by Britain, and the boundary, known as the "Durand Line," divides tribes which have the same blood, religion and language.

On both sides of a frontier without geographical or ethnographical significance, the hillmen regard the King of Afghanistan as their Badsha, the Father in Islam. For centuries they have been accustomed to making a living by raiding the Indian plains, and the subsidies they now receive, nominally for the protection of the new roads thrust into unadministered territory and stretching like fingers towards the Afghan border, are insufficient to make up for the loss of loot.

Since 1919 Britain has followed what is known as "the forward policy," which consists in making successive drives into the belt of tribal territory averaging 50 miles in depth, which separates the "Durand Line" from the "Administrative Border" of India.

This belt is inhabited by 240,000 free hillmen who have hitherto regarded Afghanistan as a refuge, and sought allies among their brother Mohmands, Shinwaris and Safis across the Durand Line. Such drives have been followed by the building of roads and forts, with the result that

the wild Waziris and Afridis are beginning to develop needs that can only be satisfied by trade.

Rifles are no longer the only tools of the frontier tribes. A tradition has arisen which makes it bad form to commit murder on the main roads, with the result that a number of warriors have turned themselves into mechanics. Waziris have captured the lorry traffic to Wana, a fort surrounded by barbed wire on the edge of No Man's Land, and Afridis drive two-ton trucks from Peshawar through the Khyber to Kabul.

Pathans are being encouraged to experiment with fruit and cotton-growing. Broadcasts in Pushtu provide the amazed villages with lectures on agricultural reform, trade, sanitation, and the suppression of unnecessary murder.

Meanwhile, the Policy—dear to officials concerned with the security of India and the defence of such frontier towns as Peshawar, a huge market, the meeting-place of merchants from Central Asia, but vulnerable in a plain surrounded by mountains—this "Forward Policy" is regarded with dismay in Kabul, where the Government is primarily interested in the peace of Asia.

For Afghanistan is a Switzerland inhabited by fiercely independent peoples, their isolation secured as much by the fears of Russia, Persia and England as by their own courage and experience of war.

The modern kingdom, with its population of perhaps ten million, gradually forming under the guidance of the Prime Minister, His Royal Highness Sardar Hashim Khan, Asia's wisest politician and one of her strongest men, has an army of some 50,000. So many recruits are supplied by each tribe. Others are chosen by casting lots in the villages, where out of every group of eight able-bodied men one must serve two years and two months with the colours. Army pay has been quadrupled since Amanullah lost his kingdom as much by his neglect of his troops as by his introduction of reforms opposed to the character and principles of the people.

The soldiers are now well armed and housed. Their

horses and uniforms are good, and they receive sufficient allowance for food, although it only amounts to 27 Afghanis —13s. a month.

Of this army, instructed by Germans and improving yearly in discipline, three divisions are posted within reach of the Indian frontier, but the Afghan Mohmands alone could send a lashkar of 30,000 to the help of their fellow-tribesmen across the border, and if the neighbouring Shinwaris chose to join in what has always seemed to them a natural raid upon the infidel, the Government in Kabul, loyally fulfilling its treaty obligations, would have to deal, not only with a border in arms, but with religious fanatics to whom the Durand Line is both illogical and invisible.

Afghanistan is the stronghold of Islam in Central Asia. It is probably the most religious country in the world. Beggar and Cabinet Minister are equally observant of the prayers and fasts enjoined by the Koran. There are 20,000 Mullahs between the Russian and British-Indian frontiers, and these men, constituting one of the most reactionary elements in Asia, have a preponderating influence with villagers and tribesmen.

They overthrew Amanullah because his unveiling of women, his shaving of beards, and his imposition of Western habits was, in their opinion, against the spirit of Islam. And they watch the cautious, sensible reforms of the present Government with unremitting vigilance.

Unfortunately, on neither side of the border are there any great tribal chiefs. The Pathans, generic name for the Pushtu-speaking tribesmen south of the Hindu Kush, as opposed to the Mongol-speaking peoples north of this mountain barrier, are too democratic to submit even to an elected authority. They live in communal fashion and pay more attention to the Mullah or holy man than to the Malik, who, as a headman in unadministered territory, may have accepted and divided among his people a considerable subsidy to maintain and protect the road that is a disagreeable emblem of civilisation,

subsequently finds himself without sufficient power to fulfil his obligations.

It is only during the last 17 years that successive Governments in Kabul have sought to weld a conglomeration of dissident tribes, many of them nomads wandering as far as Calcutta, where the Ghilzai become moneylenders, or as Australia, where the Kochi sell their camels, into an autonomous nation.

Their efforts have met with considerable success, and Afghanistan to-day is the bulwark of India against the Soviet Socialist system, which has overthrown the older Socialism of Islam north of the Oxus and spread into Sinkiang, in Western China. It is natural, therefore, that Kabul, the capital of a young and swiftly developing nation, should regard with dismay the results of recent frontier disturbances.*

At this moment an undefended road runs over the Nahakki Pass into the upper Mohmand territory. It is a case of "trailing your coat" for the tribes to tread on, and that they are likely to tread is bazaar rumour in Peshawar. Meanwhile, Kabul asks, and has every right to ask: "In return for our guarded North, give us peace on the Southern frontier, peace among the tribes we share."

*In which, in September, 1935, the Guides were ambushed, and Captain Meynell was awarded a posthumous V.C.

CHAPTER X

JELLALABAD—THE STREET OF COOKING-POTS

In twilight we came upon the great walls. They might have been dunes, so smoothly they reared out of the earth, and they had the polish of dunes when a wind has had its will with the sand. I stood under the walls and saw them as the crests of the desert breakers which stretch across Asia and Africa, but frozen into a stupendous stillness. Where there should have been a gate, a bastion curved outwards and within, a narrow entrance led to the main street of the bazaar.

Such was my first impression of Jellalabad, an immensity of wall, with no roof but the sky and hidden in the smoothed folds a doorway opening on to a street of cupboards. For each shop, raised on a shelf, had double wooden shutters padlocked on the outside.

The city was deserted except for a donkey rubbing its ears against a post, but from behind the unblemished walls came a concourse of small sounds. "It is the hour of prayer," said the Khan who walked with me. "The men are all in the mosques." He did not mention women. Whether they were in their houses or in the streets, they were equally unseen.

We walked between the cupboards that, from dawn to sunset, display the wares of two continents, and while nothing stirred within our vision, we had the impression of speech and movement within reach of our hands. It was a curious sensation, walking between walls so high that the tops seemed to move with the clouds, to see nothing, but to hear, with the effect of clairaudience, all the thousand small noises that contribute to the life of a city. We walked in silence, and gradually I was able to distinguish a

special quality of sound. After a while, I felt it pressing over the houses, a cloak of prayer, under which tribesman and townsman were robbed of their dissident individualities.

"Here no man forgets to pray," said the Khan, and at that moment we turned a corner. Straight before us lay the Street of the Cooking-pots. It tunnelled into the darkness with the effect of something rapidly receding. It was lit by the flames bursting out of the lids of samovars and by naphtha lamps swinging above the shelves on which the cooks sat among their pans and dishes. It smelled of spice and fat. It exuded a delectable greed.

I imagined mouths watering at the difficulties of choice, for here were balls of meat sizzling on a skewer, flat cakes of meat licking up the lard in a frying-pan, meat thin as paper bearing the impression of hands, scraps of meat lost in rice—and pilau, mountains and hills of pilau, with the carcases of small birds heaped among the rice!

Firelight contending with oil light produced a Rembrandtesque effect. Above the flicker of charcoal, faces grew suddenly distinct, and hooded in shadow they acquired an unusual depth of colour. Shapes, momentarily significant, appeared and disappeared against a background of teapots. There must have been many hundred teapots. Between broad-bellied urns, reflecting the images of the street and the night stretched behind them, they acquired the richness and the complications of Flemish tapestry. I saw them as a pattern with here and there the gap made by a frayed thread.

At one moment the street was empty. The shelves raised a couple of feet above the street and heaped with cooking-pots and cooks, bent under the weight of cheese and sour junket, of bread kneaded into sheets, of sugar-cane cut into circles and the green cones of a powdery substance sweet to taste. The fires dimmed. Faces resolved into the outline of a nose and a beard blanketing what remained of the light, the sweated polish of a cheek-bone. Then, as if a tube had been squeezed, the street was full and the crowd continued to flow. It seemed to have

no component parts. It consisted of a mass of off-white or near-white turbans, blankets, trousers, the flaring ends of shirts and it spread over the edges of the shelves, clearing them with an astonishing paucity of movement.

"After prayer, man needs to eat," said the Khan, and I fancied he felt—surreptitiously—the stomach that reposed under a European waistcoat.

The street was filled with whitish paste. It smelled of earth and leather, and the sharp tang of flesh. It exuded satiety.

CHAPTER XI

THE NOMADS' ROAD TO KABUL

FROM the Khyber to Kabul, I saw the road as a moving string of camels. The nomads, who had spent the six months of winter in India wandering as far south as Calcutta and the ports of the Western Ocean, were returning to their mountains. The great serai at Dakhr could not hold a tenth part of the animals laden with merchandise, tents, and bedding. Huge, shaggy beasts, with tassels hanging among the folds of fur, filled the lane between rows of tea-booths. They looked as if they wore stockings and mufflers. I supposed they had put on their thickest coats for the journey, but the material was beginning to wear thin. Hip-bones and shoulders protruded from the woolly coverings. They were proud beggars, those camels, with their magnificent fur in tatters.

As shaggy and as loosely covered were the huge men in pushtins who mingled with them on the most intimate terms. Or perhaps they were quite small inside their colossal leather coats, the raw hide embroidered with orange and lined with sheep's fleece, the unused sleeves standing out in peaks. Each pushtin had the appearance of walking about by itself. The owners had wine-dark faces with the boldly curved noses of Jew or Roman and though they wore all sorts of haphazard headgear, from hateful little woollen caps, mass-woven somewhere in a sweated civilisation, to turbans biblical in volume, there was enough red and blue about their persons to maintain the illusion of Asia.

The women had the same arrogant noses and a flush of red under their brown. They were covered with silver. It was sewn on to their sleeves and spread in a breastplate

of coins upon their bosoms. It hung in fringes on their foreheads and made fans below their ears. It imprisoned their ankles, sheathed their arms from wrists to elbows. Each woman was a banking-account, recording her husband's prosperity. And some of them were beautiful as well, with a sun-ripened, fruit-like beauty, and hair wrought into many plaits.

I admired those women. They were bold and active, prodigal of movement. They were like Joseph, in coats of many colours. Their skirts blazed with bands of red and yellow set upon black, and they walked all in a piece without movement of hip or shoulder. They never looked at the ground. With their shoes upon their heads they trod sublimely, bare-footed over sand and rock.

The camels looped upon an unending string. The men sat on the shelves of the tea cupboards, their legs tucked under them, their lips moist and drooping, bowls of pale green liquid in their hands, water-pipes beside them. The women shouted as they strove with the camels. Their children and the young of other species, kids, lambs, and puppies, were piled high above the humps, from which they looked as if they must immediately fall.

My lorry, loaded with benzene, from Peshawar to the frontier no more than a cheap means of conveyance, became a red Bucephalus. Simultaneously, it was one of those small, stalwart horses, thick of neck and coat, astride which the proud lords of Persia fought the invading Tartars, or the Moghuls hewed their way to the rape of India. It charged among the camels and its driver waxed mightily indignant. His father had been in the Sind Horse, but he, an Afridi, loved machinery. Gesturing splendidly among the turmoil of beasts he had no hands left to drive. The women shrieked and strained against the lumbering towers of camel. Ropes broke. The engine over-heated. Boxes of tea and bales originating in Japan, became intimately involved with our benzene barrels. Tails went up, loads were shed. Bucephalus bucked forward. And this went on for two days.

The frontier border, K
Pass.

A caravan in the Pass.

Entrance to the Pa

Khan, Prime Minister of Afghanistan.

His Majesty Zahir Shah, King of Afghanistan.

No doubt at intervals the road was clear. I remember one evening, a well-dressed man in brown praying all alone in the middle of a desert. There was no village within sight, yet he remained unhurried and imperturbable. As he knelt upon the sand, he contrived to interpose his state of mind as a barrier to protect him from his own and everyone else's activities. I thought of him at the time as a pilgrim who had discarded for a space the habiliments and the countenance he usually wore.

At another time, the road ran rough between a waste of stones, the graves of the third Afghan war. The driver shivered as we passed. "There are too many dead. The earth is restless. It moves——" He became a politician, as is the habit of India. "This is what you have done and now you want friendship after one hundred years of blood. You hope the young will forget, but in the schools they are saying that it was the tribes who fought you. It was with them you had a quarrel, yet you left the mountains unpunished and destroyed the towns." With the last words he put a hand on his breast, and the terrible humility of India overcame him. "I am a poor man. I understand nothing of these things."

The plain broke into villages. All of them had mighty walls. They looked strong and prosperous. Yellow mustard gilded the land. There was no sign of the intrusive poverty in which an Indian village heaps together its dust and sores, its dogs, children, and the remnants of its hovels. Those villages were defiant and completely self-sufficient. "The richer the peasants, the poorer the Government," said a man who had asked for a lift. After that he talked a great deal. He said, "The Afghan has only one vice and it is hospitality. If he has fattened a chicken for weeks to eat it with his family at some little celebration, he will kill it, without a thought, for a guest. He is the friendliest and the most suspicious of men. His obstinacy is only equalled by his desire to serve his friends and destroy his enemies. The Afghan—well I am an Afghan."

He might have added, "and the citizen of no mean country."

On the second day we left what I had imagined were the mountains and came to the real mountains. Bucephalus misbehaved. It was the camels who passed us with their scornful heads averted and that staccato gait, so detached from the earth, that suggests tortoises on stilts. The lorry made intractable noises, while we all gathered snow and packed it under the bonnet. We threw handfuls of snow at the radiator and forced more into it. I don't know what this effected, but with the help of amused peasants who emerged, earth-coloured out of the earth, we incited Bucephalus to movement and leaped hopefully into our places. After a few hundred yards we stopped again among a host of donkeys whose patchwork loads made a quilt upon the road. More snow. More help from camel-men and tent-dwellers.

Occasionally a nomad in an immense quantity of coats hailed us with a greeting originally Australian. If he had not himself acquired it selling camels or rugs in the Southern hemisphere, he had no doubt inherited it from a parent. "All Afghan carpet merchants marry Australians," explained the driver. Pressed as to the accuracy of his statement he modified it. There had been, he said, an Abdul Wahid, known some thousand miles further south as Mr. Wade. There had also been a fierce red-headed woman called Kate, who had ruled a tribe with her tongue. She swore louder and with greater variations than anyone else in the country, but this was long ago. Perhaps such marriages did not happen nowadays. He added that the price of wives was falling.

For interminable hours we laboured up a road that deserved better of us, for it was well made and not too rough. We exchanged compliments and condolences with other red lorries quiescent in peculiar positions. We helped to push. We were ourselves most generously pushed. At one moment we made a forward rush, result of much snow poulticed over the more fevered portions of

the engine, and at the next, most of the floor fell out. The hands of strangers replaced it. The barrels were re-arranged, and the owners of the hands ensured further disaster by adding themselves to our load. And all this among the same slow turmoil of beast and driver. So that the road moved with us and in the end we became part of the caravan with which at the moment we were confused.

CHAPTER XII

KABUL

KABUL has a beauty like nothing else on earth. The Afghans do not appreciate their capital because it is not sufficiently modern. They long for the traffic of London, the buildings of Paris, and the inconveniences of every American "burg." With an infinity of charm they explain that Kabul is only beginning and they are so sad about it, and at the same time so proud, that one dare not draw their attention to the mountain setting or tell them that Kabul has only one rival—Santiago in the Andes.

"We are building schools and hospitals——" they say, and it is true. There are a number of modern buildings, simple in design and well placed beside the river or at the end of long avenues. In fact the new Kabul, clean, quiet, spacious, has a good deal to recommend it. There is a Nordic air about the canals, the shorn white trees in winter, the unbroken line of the walls, the white paint or the grey, and the orderly restraint which applies to the demeanour of the people as well as to the style of their architecture. But this is an acquired effect. It is not yet Afghanistan.

The country is so individual that it merits more original expression in its capital and this it finds in the great walls which fling themselves over the hills above the fortress of Bala Hissar.

In the contrast between the plain where Kabul lies, an earth-coloured city splashed by the new white buildings, the new grey roofs of barracks, palaces, and colleges, and the mountain ramparts so much more brilliantly white which enclose it, in this sharp insistence on change where for thousands of years men have dwelt too near the earth

to need anything else, lies the challenge which contemporary Afghans fling at Afghanistan.

The plain holds a lake delicately blue. It is shadowed with a mist of poplars. In Spring the villages, each surrounded with smooth splendid walls, stand deep in fruit blossom. It is a flood of red and rose-colour spreading over the earth. Only the watch towers rise out of it, and the broken bastions from which the last rebel, Bacha i Saqan, shelled the town. Around the plain there are mountains and they are not feather-smooth like the Sierra near Granada, which reminded Osbert Sitwell of the "wings of angry swans." They are rugged under the snow. Clouds add to their height and shadows deepen their ice blues and greens into the purples of a storm-driven sea. But on a clear day they are white, and I have never looked at them without surprise. They are nearer to the city than most mountains, and more final. The country needs no other defence and certainly no further justification.

The Afghans, perhaps, have ceased to see their mountains except as barriers to invasion, and to the mechanised civilisation they long to impose upon a land familiar to Alexander, Genghis Khan, and Akbar. But in moments of relaxation they pay tribute to their orchards, to the foam and froth of blossom breaking against the poplars.

The bazaars present a more difficult problem. They may be dirty. They are certainly old-fashioned if the term can suitably be applied to Abraham or Mohammed. But they are, as surely, beautiful although the Afghans who know Paris or London refuse to acknowledge it. Instead of an ancient tapestry in which each figure has its value, they see tribesmen who will insist on wearing too many garments and all of them the wrong shape. They see townsmen who will sit on their feet instead of on chairs. Instead of a diapason of sunshine falling through torn roofs upon the street of carpets, they see beams out of alignment and walls reaching for mutual support. They talk of poverty and age as if no beauty could be found in them, yet the bazaars at Kabul satisfy every sense.

They are full of smells, strange exciting smells, whose origin I long to know. They echo with an amusing—and for that matter most modern—cacophony of sound—but the singing of birds predominates. For in every cupboard shop, with the merchant tucked away on a shelf among his canes of sugar wrapped in brilliant paper, his furs, knives, striped rugs, long-necked bottles, fat stomached pots, his books of large squiggly lettering, his silver bracelets and gold-embroidered caps, there is a cage or half a dozen cages full of the smallest imaginable birds. And they all sing. They never stop singing.

But the place where I can never refrain from that quick intake of breath which means delight, and an always-surprised delight as well, is that very street of carpets with the broken roof. One comes to it from the dimness of the covered bazaars, from the raw scarlet of silk and chemists' labels. The sun is spilled between the beams so that there is a lovely pattern of light and shade. The shops are heaped one upon another, each warm and rich with colours that have come from Merv, Isfahan, Samarkand, the legendary towns where men went to their looms as an artist to his easel. Dust turns to gold in the streams and spears of light that fall all ways across the darkness and the calm faces of the merchants, leaf-brown, leather-brown, framed in beard and turban, acquire a distinction that is in itself an emotion, like the sudden discovery of a new effect in a familiar masterpiece. I shall never forget that street. I shall never be able to describe it.

CHAPTER XIII

A BLACK DAY IN KABUL

THERE are always black days on a journey, but I remember few of such Cimmerian hue as that which immediately followed my arrival in Kabul. The arrival itself had been odd enough, for, long after dark, my lorry—without lights, of course—had driven into what appeared to be a pit surrounded by walls without end. Obviously, it had no intention of going further. With a sigh of relief the driver extricated himself from the oddments ranging from a pillow to a giant revolver with which he had been confused for two days. "It is the customs," he vouchsafed, and within a few minutes I found myself seated on my bedding, clutching a suitcase, a tin of biscuits, and a sun-umbrella, badly damaged by contact with the flanks of recalcitrant donkeys, bullocks, and camels. Shadows, agreeably proportioned, loomed in front of me, and from them came voices speaking Persian or Pushtu, in neither of which languages, I decided, was I sufficiently fluent to dissuade a determined official from examination of my luggage. So I sat forlornly at the feet of the shadows, and when these asked in charming and sympathetic tones, "Why do you come to this country if you do not speak any civilised tongue? Bismillah, it is a misfortune!" I replied, "Tonga."

Having repeated this word with every variation of accent for close upon an hour, a tonga eventually arrived. The Afghans are kind to women and to the mentally afflicted, so at least a dozen of them hoisted me into the back seat, upon which the shafts left the horse altogether, and but for the precipitate action of the coachman, the miserable animal would have been suspended in mid-air

from his collar. Adjustments having been made, we dashed through colossal double doors, followed by the screams of my first friend, the chauffeur. At the last moment he had decided he could not leave me, so, with the revolver under one arm and the red-embroidered pillow under the other, he hurled himself upon the tonga. In a confusion of hips and elbows, we rattled into the town, and first of all it was a fine town with canals beside broad streets and new white houses drawn up like soldiers. But after a while it disintegrated into bazaars tunnelling under mud roofs, and these were deserted except for an occasional ghost, or it might have been a policeman. We saw no face, just a figure without particular shape and of a curious transparence as it passed from steps awash in a pool of light to the waves of shadow under the arches.

While the chauffeur was apologising for the bumps and our consequent intimacy, and assuring me that the British Legation was exactly in the middle of the town, we left the last houses behind us inhabited only by dogs.

After that, the conversation proceeded as follows: "If the Legation is in the city, where are we going? Don't beat the horse! Tell him not to beat his horse!"

Chauffeur: "How then shall we arrive? Truly we are going in the wrong direction, but he is an old man and feeble. I have my revolver."

"I hope it isn't loaded——"

Interval for incomprehensible and apparently heart-rending exchange.

Coachman: "There is the Legation—you are at its doors. I tell you it is in the town."

Chauffeur: "I see nothing. Truly, the great English do not live on a mud-heap. Oh Mullah, to what bad end are you taking us?"

"Is he a Mullah? I won't have the horse beaten like this. It's half dead already."

Chauffeur: "No, he is not a Mullah, but he has a beard. Since we are going ever further from the Legation, he must beat or we shall not get there."

Roused to frenzy by our criticism the coachman stood up and urged the remnants of his steed into a gallop. Now there wasn't even a tomb to keep us company. The last dog had returned to the distant city. Too much shaken for further protest, we clung to the seats and hoped for a quick end. It came. On one wheel, we spun round a corner and fell on our noses in front of suitably magnificent gates.

The horse was the first to pick itself up. Some time later the chauffeur pulled me to my feet. My hat and his revolver were gone. Worse still, the gates remained shut. From the further and more desirable side of them peered a face surrounded by a khaki muffler.

While the coachman gathered our belongings from the ruts into which they had fallen, the chauffeur and I attempted to weaken the resolution expressed on the face. We spoke in several languages without the slightest effect. This often happens in Central Asia and one is unjustifiably annoyed because, of course, they are rarely the right languages. However, the chauffeur continued to draw the most moving pictures of my character and position, with equally pathetic references to the state of exhaustion which had—in some unexplained fashion—been responsible for our accident. Meanwhile the coachman had put together horse, cart, and luggage and, seated in the dust a bare six inches from the gate, was obviously prepared for an all-night argument. His speech flowed with a magnificent disregard of truth and through the awed ejaculations of the chauffeur, I found myself raised to the state of a governor's wife, several governors' wives! My car, all my cars, had broken down. My servants, a host of them, were following.

It was this duplication of material that finally persuaded the porter. To avoid the onslaught of a host, he admitted one dust-stained and dishevelled female of a race unaccustomed to falling out of tongas at Legation gates in the middle of a perfectly ordinary night without the excuse of a revolution or even of a stray assassin!

In this fashion I arrived at Kabul and the Olympian Thomas Cook, generally known as Fortune, who, I am sure, always concerns himself with the affairs of travellers, evidently decided that since I had made such a mess of my first appearance, I must do without his help. Consequently, the first thing I heard next morning was that the North Road, the only means of crossing the Hindu Kush, was blocked by late snow.

"At least, I suppose it is blocked," said my informant. "But there's something rather odd about your visit. No, I don't mean last night. It's the Afghans. They're the most hospitable people in the world, when they know you, but they don't like strangers, and I can't say I blame them. They've suffered enough in the last hundred years."

Considering the first sentences while listening to the last, I decided they needed amplification. "What's odd?" I asked, and saw the Diplomatist wince.

"It would be difficult to tell you in so many words, but I feel the Afghans—mind you, they are charming people and great friends of mine—would like to have a look at you before they decide to let you loose on the North Road."

"Well, when can I see the P.M.? He *is* in Afghanistan, isn't he?"

The Diplomatist contrived an expression admirably suited to the sympathy he felt for both parties concerned. "I think you should resign yourself to waiting a week or two. Play their own game. If you are patient, you will probably be able to wear down their resistance. Do not hurry. Here, we are so used to this sort of situation. There is never anything to be gained by hurrying."

"But what *is* the situation?" I demanded.

The Diplomatist allowed surprise to verge on disapproval. "I thought I'd explained. A certain amount of suspicion—it is a delicate matter. As I said, they're the most generous of hosts. Once they've had a look at you, I'm sure——"

"But how can they have a look at me, if they won't see me," I protested.

The Diplomatist smiled. "You'll find the situation will improve—it's just a matter of choosing the best moment——"

He was right, of course, but this reflection did not comfort me as I drove to the Soviet Embassy, its flag the brightest note of colour in a street of whitewash, mud, and leafless poplars.

An Afghan soldier, very smart in his thick khaki, opened just sufficient door for me to enter, for it was one of those old-fashioned houses surrounded by walls, in which courts and rooms lead one into another until, somewhere in the centre, one finds an unexpected garden. Here the Ambassador received me. He was a large man, portly and good-tempered. His appearance suggested that he enjoyed being amiable and would be glad to help anyone he happened to like. I thought he might like quite a lot of people, but I reminded myself gloomily that a Slavonic appearance is specially designed for the hiding of all material thought.

"But, Madame, I know nothing whatsoever about your visa. I have received no instructions at all——"

In vain, I pleaded that after eight months' negotiation Moscow had accorded the said visa, and London had sworn that Kabul should be informed. Even at so disastrous a moment, I was amused to find we spoke of the three towns as if they were individuals and after a while, still smiling, we used their names familiarly, saying with a shrug that no doubt "London" had been busy, or "Moscow" careless.

Meanwhile we politely disguised our thoughts, or, perhaps, the Ambassador, having, as it proved, no need for strategy, was merely concealing a certain discomfort at having to refuse what, as a man, he would so much rather have granted.

In the end we compromised on a telegram. It was a good telegram and more explicit than most of those

addressed to dilatory Government departments, but I hadn't much hope of its effect because I had sent just the same sort of telegram six years ago, first from Tehran and then from Tabriz. The result in both cases had been a decided "No," even a pleased and self-congratulatory "No." In fact, my only comfort that black day was the reflection that since Russia was excellent at saying "No," there could be no reason why she should hesitate to say it, or make use of subterfuges to avoid saying it.

When I returned to the Legation to send other telegrams, I was met by a cheerful, "Well, I didn't expect them to be quite so final about it, but I'd have been more surprised if you had come back with the visa in black and white. Now, you'll *have* to be patient. Sit down, be calm, and let's see what you make of Kabul."

Another voice added, "Here, you've got the whole of modern Afghanistan——"

A third contradicted: "The reason for it, let's say——"

CHAPTER XIV

MODERN AFGHANISTAN

AFGHANISTAN affords an interesting contrast between the extremes of feudalism and democracy, as represented by townsfolk and tribesmen.

The Government is an autocracy vested in the hands of one family. It is beneficent so far as the country is concerned, but ruthless with regard to its political opponents. And there is a gap of a thousand years between the point of view of the officials, many of them young intellectuals educated abroad, responsible for the modernisation of the cities, and that of the tent-dwelling nomads, unchanged since the days of Alexander or Genghiz Khan.

The present King succeeded to a stable throne after the murder of his father, Nadir Khan—a great man who, without money or soldiers, reconquered the country after Amanullah's flight, and in spite of hostility, suspicion and intrigue succeeded, during the five years of his reign, in laying the foundations of modern Afghanistan.

The son, Zahir Khan, is 21, a shy and pleasant youth with good manners, who speaks French, is keen on tennis, and an excellent shot. He is learning the art of monarchy under the tuition of his uncle, Hashim Khan, on whom he relies for the government of a country sharply divided by its distrust of Russia and England.

The Prime Minister is 51 and an ardent patriot. For years he has overworked in order to secure a peaceful and prosperous country. Since the unity of Afghanistan depends on his life, he is obliged to guard it with extravagant precautions. He rarely leaves his house except in broad daylight with a formidable guard, but he contrives to keep

in touch with foreign opinion, and in addition to being an extremely astute politician with a sympathetic understanding of the diverse and often dissident needs of his countrymen, he is honest, intelligent and endowed with a remarkable strength of will.

Hashim Khan has proved himself a reliable ally, but he is in a difficult position. For Afghanistan is so obviously a screen between the Communism of Central Asia and the defensive Imperialism of British India that the situation at times becomes ludicrous.

Thus, if a Russian diplomat seeks a change of air towards the South, Delhi immediately fears political invasion, while if an English official ventures to shoot or fish within reach of the new strategic road leading North to the Oxus, the Soviet protests. It is therefore the most onerous duty of the Government to hold the balance between Russian ambitions, seeking fulfilment as much by trade as by propaganda and the fears of harassed British statesmen who see the tribes between the administrative border of India and the real frontier at the mercy of Bolshevik agitators.

In actual fact, Russian propaganda has considerably diminished since the improvement of relations between London and Moscow, and if Soviet influence predominates in Afghanistan it is because over 50 per cent of the trade is in their hands.

Herat, the other Northern market, appears to be completely stocked by Russia. Hardware, cotton stuffs, crockery and petrol,* find their way to Kabul, but southwards, in Kandahar, the most noticeable Soviet products are red silk handkerchiefs.

Japan, whose trade comes through India and amounts to 20 per cent of the total, has recently established a Legation in Kabul. Her representatives are concentrating on a tremendous commercial drive. The means vary from the Secretaries' supposed conversion to Islam to leaflets marked "Confidential" issued to importers, with the

* Selling at 8d. a gallon below its rivals.

prospectus of a bicycle costing 32 to 36 yens—"Should these prices prove too high, we shall be pleased to negotiate on your terms, since we are anxious to extend our market in Central Asia."

Germany has advisers established in the national trading company, Shirkat-i-Ashami, and some 40 of her nationals are potentially influential as teachers, engineers and technical experts.

But rumours, recently current, exaggerated such influence when attributing to it a general Jewish persecution. In fact, the Afghan Government, through Abdul Majid Khan, the thirty-five-year-old head of the National Bank and Director of Shirkat-i-Ashami, capital of 80,000,000 Afghanis (£2,000,000), has established so many monopolies —caracul skins, petrol, sugar, fruit, cotton goods pending —that the middlemen, generally Jews residing near the Russian frontier and acting as agents for their co-religionists in Europe, have lost their employment and in many cases have left the country.

Administratively, Afghanistan is a young men's preserve. The older men lost their lives in succeeding revolutions or, more fortunate, retired to finish them in discreet oblivion. Their successors, including a Foreign Minister in the middle thirties and a Governor of the great commercial centre of Kandahar even younger, are doing well.

Fair weather roads now connect the main towns with the provinces, and with the frontiers which lie across a series of mountain passes. There are weekly or bi-weekly lorry services for mails. On these, passengers pay a few shillings for a two days' journey in complete safety and comparative comfort.

Education is improving under the direction of Indian, French and German teachers. Turkish women doctors are allowed to enter the zenanas, but otherwise the Afghan women are completely isolated. For them there is neither schooling nor any form of modern amenity.

Here the victory of the Mullahs has been drastic, and no Moslem woman dare show herself in the street without

the burqa which covers her like a tent from head to foot.

On the other hand, every effort is being made to improve public health, and since fanatics opposed the study of anatomy in Kabul, a dozen medical students have been sent to Calcutta.

In such ways the Government attempts to combine progress with conciliation. Against it are the reactionary elements controlled by the Mullahs, with whom it is impossible to reason, a few youthful republicans influenced by their Turkish training and those traders who resent the monopolies which have done much to increase the revenue, but have, in Russian fashion, put an end to private trade.

In the south Amanullah still has a following, increased, perhaps, by the natural opposition of a democratic people to an autocracy feudal in its methods, although modern in its aims. In addition, the nomads, especially the Ghilzais, who sometimes startle one, as I have said, with an Australian greeting (relic of a camel-selling journey to the Southern Hemisphere, or tribute to a wife acquired while trading carpets), would be sufficiently powerful to overthrow any government if they chose to unite. But they acknowledge no paramount chief, and for six months of the year they are scattered all over Southern Asia.

Moreover, among the new schools and the new hospitals there is a cadet college intended for the sons of tribal headmen, from whom it is hoped to recruit permanent officers. This should contribute to the formation of a middle class between the Westernised ministers and officials and a populace still inspired by the time-honoured maxim of Islam—"All change is sin."

Against the Government—at times—is the very natural suspicion of foreign goodwill engendered by the fruitless wars of a hundred years and the isolated position of the country out of touch with the sea. But for it—and overwhelmingly so—is the record of the last six years, a record of internal security, external peace, and a growing

financial prosperity; a revenue trebled by wise administration and expended, not on ornate public buildings, as in the days of Amanullah, but on agriculture and social services.

For it, too, is the stalwart and generous character of the Afghan who, in the settled areas, takes his rifle much as a walking-stick, and is always ready to welcome the traveller with an interested, "May all your troubles lie behind you."

CHAPTER XV

THREE CAME TO LUNCH

THEY came to lunch, all three of them, H.H. Sardar Hashim Khan, the Prime Minister, the great man of Central Asia, and the reason for modern Afghanistan; Naim Khan, acting Foreign Minister; and the Minister for Education. And the instant they entered the room, I wondered why the situation had been "delicate," how I had ever imagined that anything but snow impeded my immediate start for the North, and why, during the last ten days, we had all of us invented the most complicated and improbable explanations for so simple a fact. In other words, I fell an easy victim to Afghan charm and I refuse to blame myself, because everyone who is not entirely and finally grown up does the same. It is so heartbreaking the way an Afghan will show you a factory, a school, or a hospital, and with the expression of a child afraid of being disillusioned about his wooden horse on which he *knows* he can ride to the moon, hastily deprecate the things of which he is justly proud for fear you will do so more effectually.

It seemed to me, during the course of lunch, that each of those three men, opposed in character and appearance, represented a facet of Afghanistan. They were all lovers of their country, but they loved her for such different reasons and in such different ways.

If Afghanistan is a tree, her roots deeply sunk in the past, the Prime Minister is the trunk from which a new growth spreads tentatively towards the future. If he lives and can continue to work at high pressure for another

fifteen years, the branches of the tree may bear fruit in education, agriculture, and commerce. The country may be established as a nation secure as it has never been since the first Kushani conqueror raided "the roof of Asia" or the last great Moghul Aurungzeb destroyed by his fanaticism the empire of his great grandfather Akbar.

Hashim Khan appeared to me as a man of middle age with the bold, rich-coloured and strong-featured face that one usually attributes to Judah or Rome. His eyes have the fullness of the East, that liquid mobility which can so easily hide a purpose or express an emotion. Broad of shoulder, dark and strong, he suggests not the crude force of a dictator, but the subtlety and the awareness both of danger and the means necessary to oppose it that so distinguished the last great Persians.

An American in search of oil, the most primitive liar I have ever met, said to me, "There are no flies on the Prime Minister, not even one of these here goddamned midges!"

In fact, Hashim Khan loves Afghanistan as it really is. He sees the country truly poor as yet, with roads flung hardily across mountains and deserts inhabited by a proud people, stalwart and vigorous, suspicious of strangers, born intriguers, like the Irish always discontented, charming and unreliable to their friends, cruel to their enemies, above all warriors who must be taught the pleasures of peace. He sees it with the women veiled and wasted, the young men imitative of Europe but unnecessarily afraid of comparison, the old men fearful of change, the South terrified of England and the North of Russia. And he is not dismayed. For he sees, also, the progress Afghanistan has made in six or seven years. He knows—he must know—that if Russia and England keep faith, if those two great civilisations at opposite ends of the pole can be juggled into keeping peace, he can consolidate the tribes who for so long have regarded themselves primarily as Tajiks or Usbegs, Mohmands or Shinwaris, Duranis

or Jazaras, and make of them no more and no less than Afghans.

This is the strength of the Prime Minister. He doesn't want to make his compatriots into bad copies of Europeans. He has instituted no startling Western reforms. The richest and best-educated Afghans, the ministers and Government officials live simply and in a manner fitted to the country. They have their gramophones and their cine cameras, but there are neither night-clubs, restaurants, nor cinemas, in Kabul. Instead of turning night into day, they get up early and go shooting or falcon hunting. I remember the Minister for Education had determined to account for one hundred snipe on his holiday and had been very disappointed because, after walking for ten hours through marshes, he had only got ninety-seven, plus a number of duck.

Naim Khan, who is married to the King's sister, is an amazingly good-looking young man in the middle twenties. Yet he has the grace to be shy. He has the most beautiful hands I have ever seen, long and small-boned, just the right brown, the sort of hands that would be equally good with a rifle or a fountain pen. He is immensely tall and suitably proportioned. He speaks French fluently and has read a good deal in several languages, besides which he must be interested in political history for, after we had discussed the European situation and the fact that there might be another world war with ten million or so lives lost just because a few statesmen in Germany and France were behaving like small children who ought to be shaken out of their obstinacy, he spoke of the various "perils" we have conjured out of Asia, the Russian and the Japanese, the "yellow" and the "black."

"You in India think the last great invasion by way of Afghanistan"—the immemorial route of Sasanians and Tartars, Bactrians, Greeks, and Moghuls, of their great leaders, Genghiz Khan, Alexander, and Shah Jehan—"will be from Russia. But we look further still. The Japanese are the strongest people in Asia. When they

have conquered China they will come down by the old 'Silk Road' across the Oxus and who will stop them reaching India?"

Naim Khan perhaps sees Afghanistan as he would like her to be, overburdened with the conveniences and amenities that have had so deteriorating an effect on Western character, but he sees also very clearly her position as guardian of the road which leads to China, Russia, and India.

As for the Minister for Education, he is round and gay with a smile for everybody and a facility of speech in several languages that causes him to be used as a buffer between conflicting interests. He has a sense of proportion unusual in the East, for he does not wish to impose upon his country sufficient universities to ensure a flood of middle-class unemployment.

Talking of the existing schools with their Indian, American, German, and French teachers, he said that the standard was low and that there was no money to improve it as quickly as he would like, but his voice contradicted his words, for he, like the others, is proud of Afghanistan, and he loves her not in the fantastic fashion of the intellectuals who insist that the country must immediately resemble Europe, but for what he sensibly thinks she will be in a decade or two, as a result of improved schooling and social conditions.

When the three left, in their admirably cut European clothes with hats of grey, brown, and black caracul, I felt that all I knew of Afghanistan had gone with them as well, of course, as all the fears and suspicions I had built about my journey. The North Road, I felt, was now only blocked by snow.

"Until it melts," suggested somebody, "you might go to Kandahar." This seemed to me an excellent suggestion and not, as I should certainly have regarded it a week earlier, a means of getting rid of me in the harmless direction of Baluchistan.

That afternoon the Russian visa descended as un-

expectedly as manna from heaven. It descended with the utmost unconcern via the voice of a blonde on the telephone. "Their Excellencies would like to come to tea and, oh pardon, one moment—if the English lady would send her passport, the visa has now arrived." It was still not the right visa, but it covered a whole page and only I knew of the flaws in it.

CHAPTER XVI

TO KANDAHAR

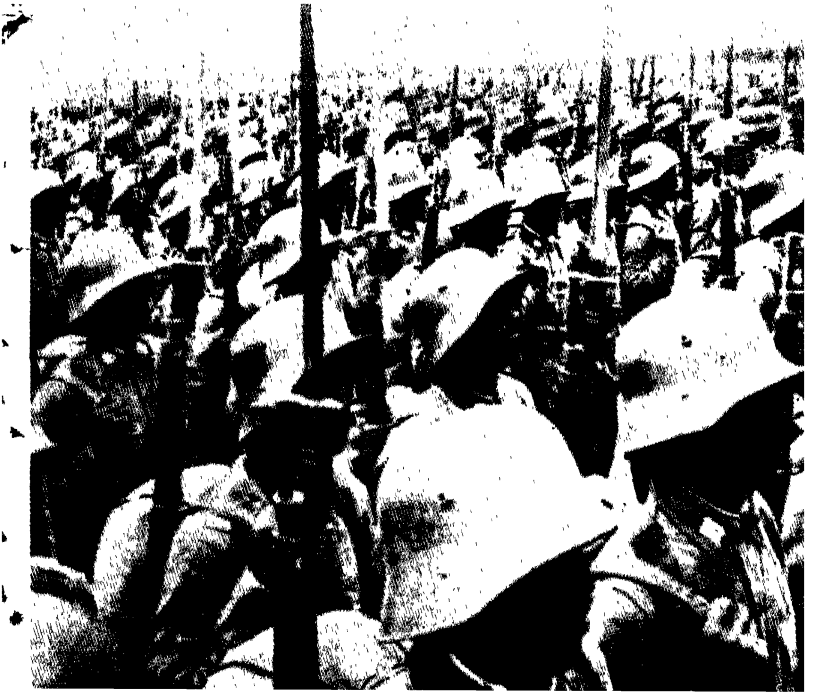
THE post lorry had started two hours late, but the driver was determined to make up time. He was the most enchanting person, with a face coloured and shaped like a filbert. He had immoderate eyelashes and a neat trimming of beard and whisker. After the first few miles, of course, he, like everyone else, was covered with dust. It lay so thickly and evenly on his darkness that he looked furred, whereas the little Frenchman squeezed between us on the front seat gradually acquired the texture of the appearance of mortar. Both men were excessively amiable and we made the best use of four languages, but unfortunately Monsieur X knew Persian but no English, and the driver Pushtu but little Persian, which divergence of speech lent the conversation an air of impermanence and fantasy.

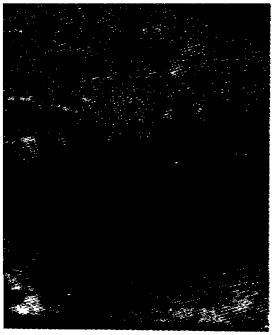
Convinced that the others could only understand a quarter of what we said, we gave free rein to our imaginations and very often we talked simultaneously, and not about the same subjects. Thus, at one time, I remember, having passed a very young girl with a red sheet pulled loosely across her face so that we saw her eyes, the amber and silver dripping over her forehead and a corner of peach-coloured cheek, I reflected aloud on the waste of human material caused by purdah. I said, "It is all right for these nomads. At least they walk and ride. Presumably they talk to men. Certainly they see them, so they don't have to submit to an unknown husband. But in the towns, the women are more closely imprisoned than criminals. That mesh through which they are supposed to be able to see is an irritant reducing the world to black

spots. How can Asia expect to compete with Europe if she only uses half of her human power——" In this fashion I must have talked for some time, while the driver contributed a running commentary: "It is good that we did not see too much of that lady's face, for here if a Moslem see even the half of a female face, he must marry it, and if he is not a Moslem, then he is shot into bits. Here they shoot very easily on account of women. Long ago, but not so long, they used to put a woman who showed her face to a stranger into a sack so that no one else could see it, and then they stoned her to death. It was not civilised that——"

Other reflections upon the strange course of civilisation flowed from the elegant figure in purplish plus fours with green stockings and shoes of American yellow, while simultaneously the Frenchman speculated, "What an effect woman has on man, except of course on the English. How remarkable that you should say of a man 'He is no good. He's always after some woman.' Is it more wise then to be always after a bird or a ball? Is it that killing snipe or playing the tennis enriches the character more than the thousand intimacies one may have with a woman? Do not make a mistake. With my physiognomy so banal, it is not likely that I should immediately appeal to a woman as a lover—pardon me, but you are not frightened of words, are you, Madame? There, I have had to study women and I have become very sensitive where they are concerned. I know now there are fifty ways by which one can approach a relationship and what can equal the satisfaction of the moment when you feel that you understand each other. It may be that I have wasted my time so far as ambition is concerned, but what a good life I have had! The Englishman is concerned always with his career. He talks of nothing but the post he should have had, but for me, to earn my living, that is enough. As for the rest, I have my books and I make myself a life of the interior——"

By this time the driver was apologising for the lack of



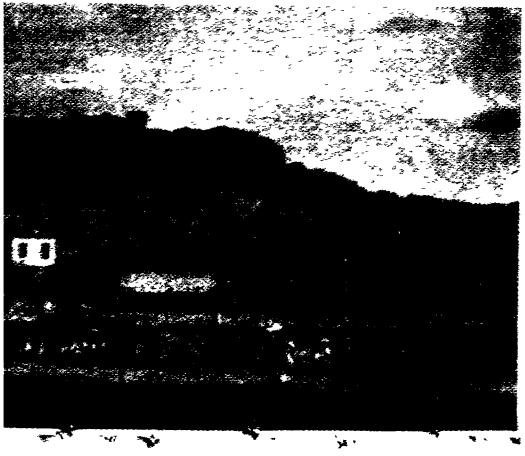


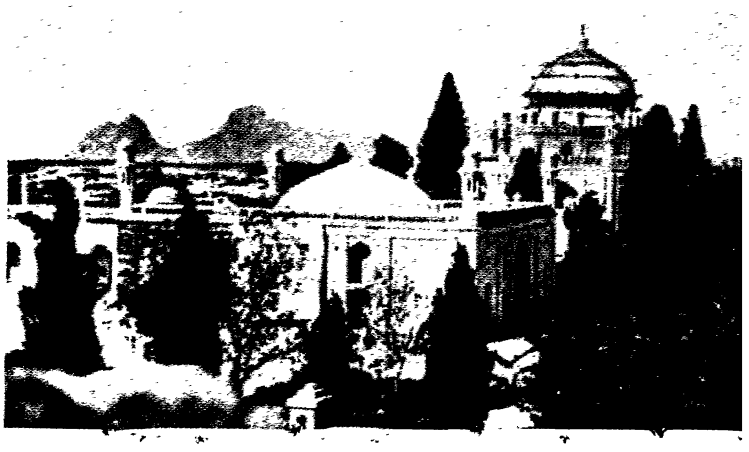
village near the capital.

Right, joys of photography in Afghanistan: Capt. Galloway surrounded by an interested crowd.

Below, left, fortress of Ghazni on the road to Kandahar. Post lorry in foreground.

Below, right, the mosque at Kandahar.





enterprise among his countrywomen. "They know nothing at all. They cannot even grow vegetables——"

"It is selfish custom not religion which imposes the chadour. I defy you to show me anything in the Koran——" I insisted, while the Frenchman's reflections had leaped an ocean. "The South American women now! What friends I have found among them. What a delicacy of perception! How well they know what they are giving——"

At this moment a prodigious bump confused our persons and our ideas. After regaining possession of ourselves and the curious assortment of objects we had dropped, we realised that we had not perhaps taken sufficient interest in each other's conversation. Embarrassed, I offered biscuits, the driver a packet of black cigarettes.

"How long do you count on staying in Kandahar?" asked Monsieur X.

"Not very long—just to see the town."

"I shall not be there very long, either, not more than a year perhaps——"

Aghast, I contemplated the gulf between fifty-two hours and as many weeks.

"And for me it is people who are interesting. Things are good or bad, according to whether they facilitate my work or minister to my comfort, but originality I find in character not in scenery."

Shortly after this I went to sleep. It is perfectly possible to sleep on the front seat of a lorry providing you have an amiable neighbour. My own idea is that during the eleven-hour journey to Mukur, both the Frenchman and I passed hours of unconsciousness propped upon the uncomplaining shoulder of the driver. We were wakened, of course, by any bumps that caused us to hit the roof and subsequently we were vaguely surprised to find the snows on a pass had given way to waste brown sand tufted with camels. We blinked and yawned, carefully adjusted our hips so that they should not do acute damage, and stared at the same huge fortified villages we had left in the

Northern valleys; but now they were surrounded by colour, the luminous green of young wheat and lucerne, the blossom of almond and apricot.

Ghazni kept us awake for some time. It is really superb, an immense fort clinging with such tenacity to a cliff that it is difficult to tell where one begins and the other ends—and in effect, the walls never do end. For after they have served the purpose of the fortress, they wander across the fields, splendidly leviathan. And thus we left them, but I couldn't resist craning back for a last sight of the Conqueror Mahmud of Ghazni's castle. Unfortunately, the door chose that moment to open and I was only saved by the prompt and united action of my companions. Needless to say everything I possessed fell into the road. We stopped. We stretched. We dusted. And from the back of the lorry poured a sudden flood of humanity. I had no idea so many people could possibly be compressed upon, between, and under sacks of mail. The flood was not content to pour across the road. It made for the nearest water which lay stagnant in a ditch. With much praise to Allah the passengers washed in and drank the thick, coffee-coloured liquid while the landscape burgeoned with heavily turbaned figures desiring a lift. Fortunately, for the khaki-coloured mail bus is something of a race-horse and our resplendent driver with motor badges on his lapels made a habit of ignoring would-be passengers gesticulating by the roadside, another lorry arrived. It seemed to be stuffed with boots. All one could see were the soles, heavily nailed, or the half-moons and even now I can't conceive how the owners had managed to arrange themselves. Were they lying with their heads on the floor-boards? And if so, why weren't their necks broken? As soon as the lorry stopped, there was vast confusion among the boots. Men in voluminous white, men in tweeds, men in waistcoats, night-shirts, and a variety of trouserings heaved, squeezed, and rolled out on to the road. It was as if a mammoth gave birth and I found myself fascinated by the extent of its labour, and I

drew nearer to the quivering creature and watched more and more progeny ejected. When I had counted twenty-three from the inside and fifteen from the roof, the mail van showed signs of departure.

In this fashion we drove 150-odd miles to Mukur, and next day a similar distance to Kandahar. The road is a definite feat and in the larger villages there are excellent rest-houses with clean beds, tea, and a pilau for the ordering. But, apart from the yearly battles with snow on the ranges and flood in the river beds, the interesting thing about the road is that broad and metalled, rough certainly, but no rougher than the highways of Persia or Turkey, it runs for tens of miles without sight of a village, it drives straight through the grazing lands of the nomads, it loses itself in mountains and deserts, yet, apparently unguarded, it is always safe. I remember beginning our last conversation with some such remark. By this time we were all tired. It was hot and we had left the wild plains with black tents scattered across them and herds of camel or sheep with tails like muffs wandering in search of pasture. We were bucketing across the Southern desert, in which Kandahar is an oasis of brilliant reds and greens, and after each rut the driver swore, very gently, under his breath. "There should be a railway," he said. "The traders would like it, but the tribesmen go to the government and say, 'If it is Afghan money that will build, good, but we will not have foreign capital, for that is the way to foreign rule.'"

The Frenchman interrupted, "By foreign they mean English and it is of the most comprehensible because, figure to yourself, it was by this road your Lord Roberts marched to Kabul. In fourteen days, what an achievement! But each building destroyed, each village deserted, means to the Afghan a mile-stone of the English advance."

"They hate us," I suggested, and the driver agreed, but without venom. "You want to take our country. It is common knowledge."

"He is too polite," said the Frenchman, "to tell you what he really thinks."

"What *does* he think?"

Monsieur X lit his fiftieth cigarette and held the wheel while the Afghan did likewise. "In Kandahar," he said, "they have only one name for an English traveller. It is 'spy.' There is nothing that England does, but is fuel for their suspicions. Even the Indians trading in the bazaar are detested and ill-used because they 'belong to the British.'"

The little man looked rather like a frog bewitched, perhaps, by some ill-natured rival, for his manners were exquisite and his disposition obviously of the most amiable, since during the rougher stretches he was apt—without protest—to sink between the two seats so that the driver and I found ourselves using him as an extra cushion. He spoke with entire detachment. He was not interested in politics. He had his books, his thoughts of women, and his "life of the interior."

CHAPTER XVII

IN KANDAHAR

In Kandahar, I stayed in an old Afghan house. It belonged to an Indian and it consisted of several yards leading one into another, with rooms opening round them and screens blocking any direct entrance so that it seemed as if one walked a long way before reaching the central court. Here there were cypresses, a huge mulberry tree, and many zinnias in pots. Pigeons and a fighting partridge sunned themselves on the flat roofs which commanded an excellent view of the city. Towards evening a clamorous host of starlings went to bed in the cypresses.

Part of the court was screened for the use of my host's wife and four daughters. Here and in the small rooms beyond, the mother, an old woman at 48, was happy enough "to rest after the bearing of ten children" and "to occupy herself with her books and her prayers." But the eldest of the daughters was sixteen. She was pretty, with the eyes of a faun and the smoothest golden-brown skin. She could speak some English and had been to one of the big Indian schools. I wondered how she occupied herself in the seclusion forced upon her by wars that have bred hatred between neighbours sharing language and religion. For the court of cypresses was always empty. No Afghan would extend hospitality or receive it from one who served the British.

In that great town, my Indian friends, intelligent, charming, and widely travelled, knew no one, saw no one. When they went out they smothered themselves in the chadour with its cruel mesh across the eyes. For the rest of the day and the rest of the year, the five of them inhabited

a few square yards of space, imprisoned as securely by the doubts and suspicions of their fellows as by the walls which shut out everything but a patch of sky.

Here, I thought, while we discussed the marriage of daughters and the contrariness of peas which refused to grow familiarly with a tortoise, an apricot tree, and a clothes-line, was another and more drastic "life of the interior."

Outside the house of cypresses, the wide and tree-lined streets spread splendidly between government buildings. When they reached the bazaars, they made themselves into a cross and ran straight out towards the horizon, leaving behind them, in their determination to reach Kabul, Herat, Chamman, and Baluchistan, all the little shops, stuffed with silk and sheepskins, silver, pottery, copper, and water-pipes, that clung to their beginnings. I liked the bazaar, white-walled and filled with the white clothes and turbans of men from Northern India and Southern Asia. Dust added to the general whiteness. Donkeys and camels were coated with it. Dark skins became grey under it. Eyelashes and lips showed a furring of soft dim-colour.

But Westwards, beyond Kandahar, the new houses are in a wealth of green. I had not realised how incomparably superior to any other colour this silken green of grain growing and leaves budding could be, till I came to it after so many miles of brown. I had thought the blossom lovely when it flared above mud walls in the plain of Kabul, but here the orchards of plum, apricot, almond, and pomegranate, all of them in flower, rose out of wheat fields riotously green and spread their rich red and white to the foot of mountains no longer snow-covered, but carved like old jewels and set, hard, and precious, against the pallor of a desert sky.

It was the most surprising contrast, for a mile away on the other side of the town a harsh earth littered with stones erupted into rows and rows of termite houses, round-shelled because there is no wood for beams or

posts, and beyond them the same earth heaped itself against the desert wall of India.

In the late evening I drove out to Chel Zerin. Having climbed the forty steps, so much too high for modern gait, to Babar's arch of victory, I sat upon the narrow rock with the headless lions behind me, and looked down on the oasis of Kandahar. Delicious domed villages appeared to have tumbled into the middle of the fruit-trees. I could see the black and red of nomad caravans camped for the night, and imagine the piles of gaudy bedding, the skirts like carnival balloons, and the children's caps of proud purple ornamented with silver.

Tongas rattled along the road. Lorries trailed a funnel of dust behind them. Camels ignored the presence of donkeys, who, however, went faster and a great deal more companionably towards their goal.

The sun sank and light too clear to have any colour at all was poured over field and orchard. The blossom took the colours of wine. It spilled from a jade-green cup and then, quite suddenly the whole earth was in shadow with the peaks standing up like thrones of kings or, maybe, since Afghanistan is more faithful to her Mullahs than her princes, like the altars of a surrealist deity.

Beside me the only occupant of the rock cast off his shoes and flung himself on his face. A moment later, oblivious of his sores and rags, he was intoning with the arrogance that has never known doubt. "There is no God but God and Mohammed is his Prophet."

CHAPTER XVIII

TRAVELLING WITH AFGHANS

To travel with Afghans is a pleasure and something of a humiliation. I am referring to lorry travel, which is a test of manners and character. Unfortunately, few Europeans can do more than remain patient and polite after a dozen hours jolting over a bad road and a good many more doctoring a recalcitrant carburetter or tying on chains that slip with every skid. But the Afghan regards all these matters as the concomitants of an ordinary existence and, unlike the Westerners he admires and distrusts, he has no quarrel with life.

Arabs are equally kind to their fellow-travellers and their courtesy is equal to the most outrageous demands, but they haven't the Afghan sense of humour which turns adverse circumstance into a joke and thus defeats it.

Persians are charmingly whimsical over the difficulties of, say, a seventy-two-hour journey across a desert, the tyres stuffed with sacking or dry bush and the radiator leaking, but eventually they become exhausted and then they seek solace in opium. But the Afghan seems to thrive on foodless days and sleepless nights. If, piled upon a leaning tower of luggage on the top of a two-ton truck, he is thrown into the mud, he carries it off as if it were a trick performed for the delight of an audience. If, crushed among the top layer of those within the lorry, he hits the roof with a crack that would split an ordinary skull, he congratulates himself on having put on his thickest caraculi hat and announces—perhaps—that his brother who lives in a town has always told him his head isn't hard enough to deal with the village moneylender.

It was my good fortune to return from Kandahar to

Kabul with seventeen Afghans on the post lorry. Now the southbound journey had been without incident, unless the revelations of Monsieur X could count as such, but since then it had rained, and forty miles out of Kandahar the road became a morass. We had started, of course, three hours after the scheduled time, but the gay and gallant little driver, his filbert-brown face at once gentle and determined, assured us all that he had mended the lights and would reach Mukur "before the moon."

Unfortunately there is little metalling on that particular road and in the wet clay, the lorry proceeded in a series of graceful curves that took us first into a ditch, and then within a few inches of the drop into a river bed. The Afghans remained unmoved. When the vehicle shuddered as if with distaste at its narrow escape and scrambled sideways in a succession of remarkable skids, they laughed and suggested we might do better backwards. It was I who begged for chains, and immediately the whole company descended into the rain. During subsequent hours most of them kneeled, crawled or lay in a foot of mud, regardless of their clothes, while they attempted first to fasten the chains in normal fashion and then, when it was discovered that nobody knew how the hooks worked, to tie them on with a mass of wire and string. After I too had lain in the mud underneath the lorry because I felt that I alone must by superior intelligence know at once how a hook that looked like an intestinal accident should close, someone suggested that it would be altogether simpler if we jacked up the lorry. While a dozen still amiable people did this and subsequently regarded the problem from a new, but no less disturbing angle, I went for a walk. When I returned, it was raining harder than ever and the best dressed of the passengers, his coat laid aside, his admirable trousers harmonising with shirt, socks, and tie of agreeably assorted blues was bending over a small, artificial pool which a friend had just created for him with stones and water scooped up in his hat. Noticing the surprise I was not quick enough to hide, the

young man smiled and said in the most natural way—in English—"I am just praying to God."

"Oh yes, of course," I replied, looking at the skies which registered I thought no normal hour for devotion.

Later, with the lorry bucking over ruts and making a great fuss whenever her tail swung sideways in a soft slither of mud, I wondered why civilisation insists on shirts being worn inside and tempers outside. A terrific bump landed me full on the thigh of the enchanting Afghan who had squeezed himself into a third of his rightful space on the front seat in order that I might be more comfortable. He bowed and made a gesture indicating that, if anything, I had added to the distinction and comfort of his journey. He even refrained from rubbing his leg which must have been momentarily paralysed. I looked over my shoulder and from the dark interior where turbans, feet, and bodies were peculiarly confused, I garnered thirteen smiles. The other two were presumably on the floor, where their owners strove among the feet, the luggage and the water-pipes of their friends.

Hastily I relegated civilisation to the waste-paper basket and I marvelled the more that even the youngest and most brilliant intellectuals, ambitious to place their country on a pedestal composed of machines, electricity, concrete, macadam, and tweeds, can so overlook the basic qualities of character in which Afghanistan is so rich in favour of the general anæmia of morals, manners, and tempers which constitute the European empyrean.

Meanwhile I was having great difficulty in remaining on the plunging truck, for the door would not stay shut. In vain my fellow passengers had tied it up with string filched from their parcels and handkerchiefs which should have been holding fresh almonds bought in Kandahar. As soon as I was thrown against it, the door triumphantly opened. At last the driver, who had had nothing to eat all day, sighed, smiled, shook his faun-like head, and got out into the rain. From the back leaped also one Aziz Ullah, whose name, literally translated, means Beauty of

God. He was our last and most effective resort in all trouble. Did the lorry show signs of rolling backwards on a hill, Aziz Ullah flung himself from the tailboard and wedged stones under the back wheels. Did the engines make sounds indicative of a volcano about to erupt, Aziz Ullah fled for the nearest liquid and poured it, clay and all, into the protesting radiator. Now, caked with mud, scarred by various missiles flung from the back wheels, he approached my door, and on an impulse that would have done credit to Raleigh, he removed his belt. A three-inch strip of sound leather would, he felt, put an end to that door's power of making a nuisance of itself, but unfortunately nothing was left to hold up his trousers. With a beautiful completeness, they fell down. The lorry rocked with the delight of its occupants. The joke was the better because Beauty of God stood ankle deep in slime. The driver laughed. So did my neighbour, but loudest and longest laughed Aziz Ullah.

Towards midnight we arrived at Mukur and the whole company saw me into the rest-house before they would consent to find beds and food for themselves. While I stood in the middle of a comfortable room, with hot water and a fine, new bed waiting for me, most of them returned to ask if I wanted tea, or a bath, or somebody's coat as an extra blanket. My neighbour, whose name and business I never knew, came last of all and murmured in German, "You perhaps bathroom paper have not. I bring—so." Thrusting the sheets into my hand, he departed, stiff, unshaved and a great gentleman.

Next day the rain stopped and engine trouble began. Three times the driver and Aziz Ullah took the entire carburetter to pieces and removed from it birds' nest substances. With the utmost patience and good temper they sat in the mud with a cold wind blowing, surrounded by more and more engine, while all the ordinary lorries which had started hours later from Mukur gathered like flies round a honeypot. Their occupants offered every kind of help, and when this was refused because not more than

twenty people could operate on one carburetter, they hunched themselves into bundles under the shelter of their enormous sheepskin cloaks and sucked their water-pipes, or lay upon their backs heedless of the amount of earth that would adhere to them, or prayed with a strip of shawl spread towards Mecca.

The heaviest loaded of all the lorries halted in front of me. I counted eleven passengers balanced upon a leaning tower of luggage that swayed from the roof like a skyscraper in a gale. Inside cheerful travellers were compressed into the substance of prune mould. They could not stir. Each urged the others to make the first essential movement that would relieve the mass. Finally there was a general upheaval and from it men were ejected into the road. They laughed, stretched and shook themselves. One said it was a great thing to travel. He wished he had brought his son. The boy had seen nothing of the world.

After an hour or so we proceeded on our journey, and in that glow of satisfaction that unites all proper travellers after a difficulty surmounted, we conversed fluently in Pushtu which I didn't understand, English incomprehensible to both my companions, twenty oddly assorted words of German garnered in Kabul by my neighbour, as much Persian of which I was inordinately proud, and a language unknown to any of us which the driver said was "Belgis." By this time we were all so aware of each other's thoughts that it didn't really much matter what we talked. In fact, when my neighbour told a grim tale of having been upset on the road from Mazar to the capital, in a lorry which had turned over no less than three times on its way down a cliff, his gestures were so descriptive that he needn't have used any words at all. The only detail I was unable to discover was the date of the accident. I don't know if it happened last week, or five years ago, but nevertheless I felt as if I had been present when the first skid sent an overloaded truck to the edge of eternity, a second gave it brief respite and the last sent it hurtling over and

over until it landed, piecemeal, a surprising number of feet below.

That day we lunched in the middle of Ghazni street under the lovely long walls of her fortress, because everyone felt he must keep in touch with the lorry. The cook-shops were urged to a speed that left them disorganised for hours. Still masticating, the passengers climbed into their places. With a disheartening amount of gulps, the lorry forced her way through a crowd who were, I hoped, pleased by the pantomime of haste we provided for them. At me, they gazed with interest, appreciation and mirth. The driver disapproved. "All this men is fool," he said, surprisingly in English.

Five minutes later, we were seated, this time in snow, while we took to pieces whatever came handiest under the bonnet. Unruffled, those passengers for whom no loose portions of engine were available, conversed about the excellent progress we were making, and how, soon, there would be no camels left. A very old man, who spoke to me in fragmentary Arabic, ventured most courteously to interpolate amidst the general appreciation of the new security and speed of life, the remark that with a donkey one had the certainty of arriving and also the knowledge at what hour one would arrive. The others thought this was an excellent joke and after a while the old man agreed.

After a third and still longer breakdown, during which the carburetter had yielded a variety of interesting objects with which it should have had no relation, we halted, in darkness and a gale, to drop some mail at an isolated tower. Snow had drifted against it. There was not a tree within sight. We had had no food for eight hours, and were half frozen by sleet and wind. Yet no sooner had the lorry stopped than men flowed from the back, and the stream-effect was heightened by the fact that the carpets and pieces of clothing they carried blew out interminably behind them. With one accord they cast the stuffs upon the ground and knelt swiftly, bowing as one person towards an invisible kibla. The very smart young man in selected blues made

room on his rug or coat for the old man bundled up in a mass of white draperies who had spoken of donkeys. Together in the most complete unison they performed the swift doublings and undoublings that automatically accompany the Moslem prayers. Presented with the sudden accentuation of their posteriors, I admired for the hundredth time the utter lack of self-consciousness which the Afghan brings to his devotions and wondered why he cannot introduce a little of it into his daily life, during which he is a martyr to his own fear of criticism.

As soon as the last genuflection had been made, the passengers remembered, perhaps, their empty stomachs and their aching joints. Stiffly, they hurried towards the lorry. We started and in splendid fashion—brakes and lights both doubtful—we charged down the further side of the pass. Kabul was within sight, five miles, four, three. We could walk it now, I thought.

The lorry gasped before coming to a precipitate halt. With the expression of a small child that has been refused an unreasonable request, an expression that did not even protest, the driver descended and began at once to dismember the carburetter. "In few time, I starting——" he assured me.

Two hours later we reached Kabul. The passengers descended. They embraced each other, or repetitively shook hands, self-congratulatory after such an excellent journey. "Allah be praised for this good day," said the old man, and I found myself suddenly agreeing with him. It had been a good day. I had enjoyed it.

CHAPTER XIX

PREPARATIONS AT KABUL

THE morning after I returned from Kandahar, I realised that Kabul had acquired the charm of familiarity. The magpies had completed their nest in the Legation garden. The fruit blossom was out. I had to revisit my favourite bazaar. I wanted another ride across the salt-pans by the lake. Above all, I must stand again on the unfinished terrace of Amanullah's empty palace and look across leagues of mud, brushed with the faint shadows of still leafless poplars. It seemed to me that the snows had withdrawn. Spring was at hand, but a bleached and colourless spring. I found the pale earth under a pale sky entirely satisfying.

But I had little time for the meditation which I am sure Kabul would induce. For while I leaned from an open window to count the magpies, there burst into the room a Secretary of Legation, Captain Galloway, known to all the world as "George," although it was not his name. "I say, the Russians are coming to tea, and, by the way, the visa's all right."

The occasion was so momentous that I had difficulty in adjusting my behaviour. For a moment I felt an absurd impulse to embrace any odd spot on George's quite adequate features. But his surprised and always faintly shining face, with the tuft of hair standing up in defiance of convention, would have reflected such a mixture of feelings, all of them disapproving, that I was obliged to refrain.

In good order we went downstairs, but we ran the whole length of the Legation garden under the impression that there was a great deal to be done in very little time.

First of all we made lists, and each of us crossed out a good many items the other thought essential. I wanted

marmalade. Geoge pleaded for tinned milk. "Horrible stuff. I never drink it!" I retorted, and wrote in capital letters, "Spades, picks, wire netting or skid-boards," while George added, "primus, paraffin, camp-beds, my two pushtins" (which are sheepskin coats with the fleece inside), "bucket, fishing-rod, gun, hurricane lamp and Kuli Khan."

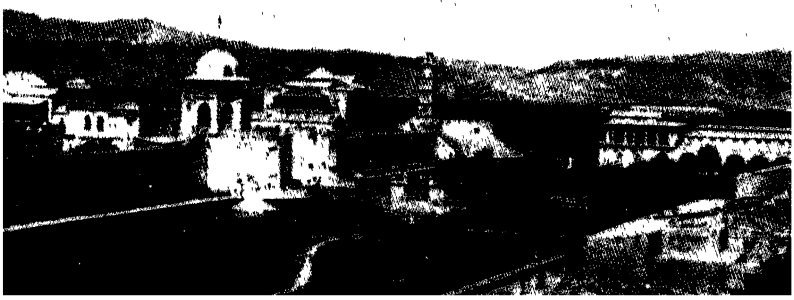
As soon as the Minister had decided to concede me the company of his Secretary as far as Mazar-i-Sherif, it became evident that Kuli Khan would come as well. The two were inseparable! They were also about as opposed in character and outlook as any people could be. Kuli Khan was highly imaginative, but without any imposed culture. He suffered from nerves. He adored gloom. Superstitious and romantic, he feared and hoped for the worst. His voice was an impossible alto, his face lugubrious and hollow. Yet he was a Moslem, a soldier, and a crack rifle-shot. He looked too tired to move, and was in fact tireless. In emergencies his voice assumed an even more peculiar pitch, while he proved himself both enterprising and original. For Kuli Khan the world was always black until it became in reality sufficiently sombre to rouse his interest. He was the sort of man you couldn't possibly rely on until you were in difficulties which appeared insoluble but which Kuli Khan would then take pleasure in unravelling as if they were loose knitting.

George, on the other hand, had the appearance generally associated with pioneers, outposts of empire and obstinate British soldiers who, to the justifiable annoyance of the enemy, don't know when they're beaten. George was a pessimist with regard to personal relationships. Women he regarded with distrust engendered by susceptibility. He kept his star of optimism for the circumstances, generally harassing, which attend life in Afghanistan, Persia or other Asian countries, concentrating on Europeanisation. He was, of course, entirely reliable. Obviously, he would become even more so as snow fell, radiators burst, and brakes broke.

It is the destiny of men like George to be relied upon

Above, a main street in Kabul.

Below, modern Kabul.



Panorama of Kabul.

Below, left, the carpet market in the old city. Centre, a market. Right, Pathan types.

Photos: Rosita Forbes

by all manner of governments and public departments and by women sufficiently perspicacious and persistent to deal with armour-plated silence. For George would not talk. Sometimes he read Chinese poetry with the accent in the right places. At intervals, he commented on obvious facts. Fortified by a fund of common sense, he made plans, and generally remembered to tell his companions what they were. Abrupt, practical, and a trifle forlorn, he was always credited with a self-possession which he did not feel. But he was as determined that strangers should believe him intolerant and egotistic as Kuli Khan was to impress the world with his incompetence and vanity.

In appearance George was robust. He could look blanker than anyone I've ever met. He never lost his temper, although he had to spend a good deal of time patching up the frayed ends of Kuli Khan's. He didn't mind how early he got up, where he slept, or what he ate. He had lots of ideas, but regarded them as dangerous. He was in spite of—or because of—such qualities a perfect companion.

Early one morning, then—it felt like six, but it was probably nearer seven—we started from the British Legation at Kabul in a three-quarter-ton lorry loaded with food, bedding and fuel, for the Afghan ranges are treeless. We had also numerous spare parts, planks and shovels for use in deep snow, a primus, a kettle and a number of buckets due to the cleanliness of Kuli Khan, who was determined that we should all bath whatever the altitude and the temperature. The party was reinforced by a driver of cheerful disposition, who appeared to be without complexes, and a greaser who, for obvious reasons, soon became known as "Deadly Nightshade."

"I hope you won't get stuck," said the Military Attaché who had supplied his colleague with the most imaginative route report I've ever read. "There's been another snowfall on the pass," he added.

CHAPTER XX

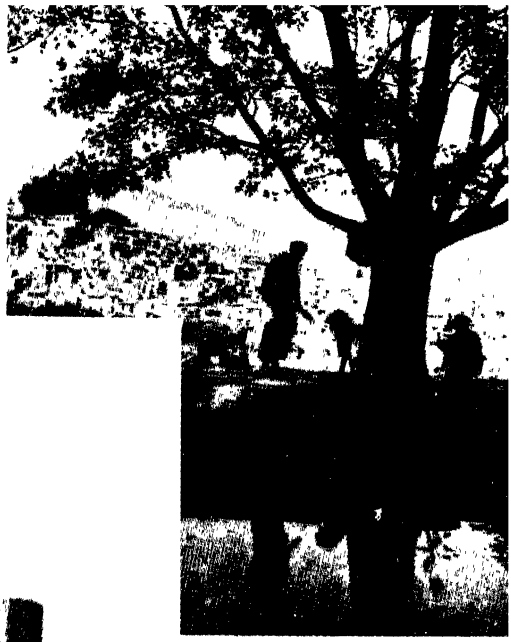
BAMYAN, VALLEY OF THE GIANT BUDDHAS

THROUGHOUT the ages there has been a route from China across the legendary Oxus, now the Amu Darya, "Mother of rivers," into Afghanistan and India. But the old "Silk Road" through Balkh, where Alexander of Macedon camped, and Bamyan, whose giant Buddhas were defaced by Genghiz Khan, circumvented the main ranges of the Hindu Kush. Only the Afghans, encouraged by Nadir Shah, have had sufficient enterprise to fling their new strategic road directly across the Shibhar Pass and to force it for some thirty-four miles through the cleft made by the Surkhab river, with at times scarcely more than a lorry's breadth between cliffs rising to several thousand feet.

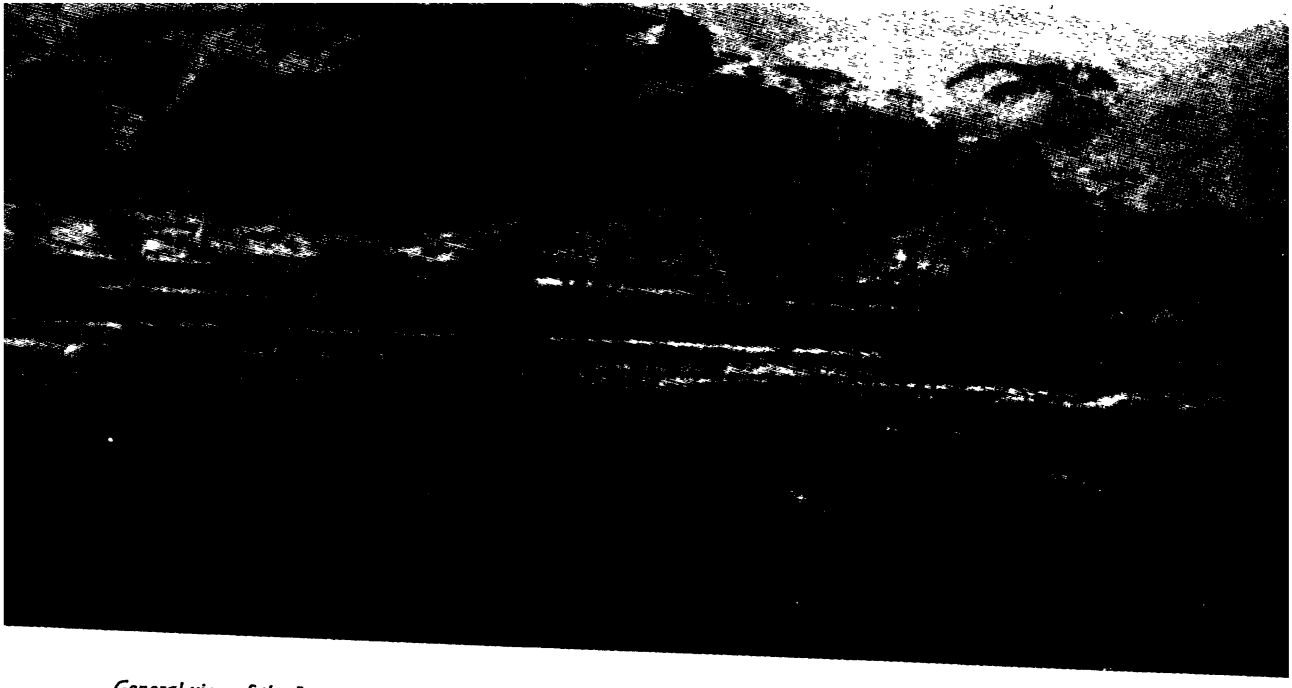
The total length of the road between Kabul and Mazar-i-Sherif, the holy city of Afghanistan, is 382 miles. It is, of course, a fair-weather track, impassable during heavy snow. In places it degenerates into a couple of ruts running across the steppes of Ghori, or climbing between a succession of frozen red breakers over the Mazar Pass. But, given the spectacular difficulties of the terrain, it is a magnificent achievement. It is also the "forbidden way" to the Soviet Republics of Central Asia.

After leaving Kabul we rolled down the "Skirt of the Hills" valley, from which came the brigand Batcha Saqai and his revolutionaries to the overthrow of Amanullah and the destruction of a good deal of his capital. Small tulips coloured the grass. Judas bushes made a purple flame. Kochis were strung along the road amidst a confusion of camels or donkeys. These gypsy folk were bundled in all manner of clothing and some of them carried fighting partridges in cages, or the breasts of their coats.

Istalif, an Afghan village in the "Skirt of the Hills" valley north of Kabul.



The old castle at Zohak on the way to Bamyan.



General view of the Bamyan cliffs, showing the caves and the niche of the largest Buddha.

The village of Serai Khaja might have been a bird market. Before every open-fronted shop, trailing its tea-couches into the mud, hung cages of singing birds. The roofs were lined with bright-coloured reed structures from which came a flutter of wings and song. It was raining, but the birds didn't mind. They went on singing above the clatter of tea-pots and cauldrons and the harsh speech of travellers sunk like tortoises into the shells made by their humped and wadded coats.

Kuli Khan wanted to buy half a dozen green and red birds scarcely larger than his thumb. He said they would be companionable. But he was sternly repressed. With three of us on the front seat amidst a litter of cameras, field-glasses, and sporting implements, and the other two crumpled into any odd space between the baggage and the roof of the lorry it seemed unnecessary to add to our impedimenta. But Kuli Khan left us in no doubt as to his disappointment. His long face drooped. Hollows darkened under his cheek-bones. The picture of misery, he leaned above us and commented on the state of the road.

It rained. It went on raining. And Kuli Khan looked as if he was going to cry.

Across the Pangshir river, Lord Curzon's "Singing Sands" were heaped against the hills. When the wind is in the right direction they shift across the rock face and a curious drumming echoes down the valley. The sound suggests a hive of monstrous and very impatient bees. According to the natives, "the sands walk," and in effect there is a certain amount of movement to account for the noise.

Our road, sunk deep in ruts, crossed a fertile plain where peasants were ploughing with instruments known to the book of Genesis. Fruit blossom flushed the gardens. The houses were still of the square mud-built type, heavily walled, with here and there a watch-tower, but they scrambled together instead of standing proudly isolated as on the Indian frontier. In the distance we saw a village

resembling a honeycomb. The buildings were cells, layered one on top of another.

At Charikar, the whole population seemed to be employed on the road, which had slipped into a morass. Every man had a spade which he used in the fashion that best suited him. I thought of a male chorus as I watched the elegant figures, draped in blankets, lingering in the mud.

Charikar is a new market. The shops are well built and modern. A rampart of them rose above the tide of camels couched among bales and saddlery. I thought of the markets familiar to Chinese travellers of the sixth and twelfth centuries. The form of the caravanseries has not changed, but the old "Silk Road" has given way to the petrol route by which caracul skins go in bulk to Russia and raw materials come South.

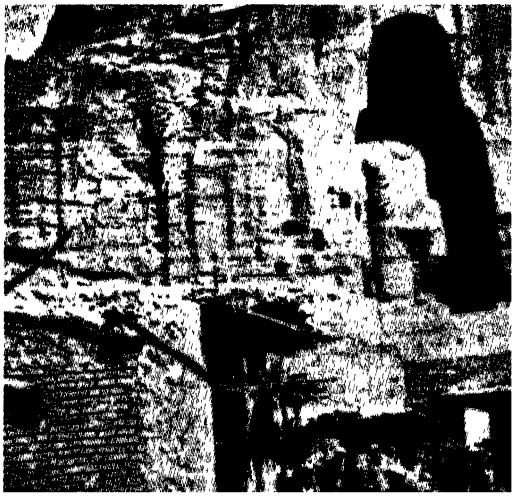
After leaving Charikar, with the Gorbund Valley rich in coal and lead, we came to the first gorges of the Kush. The road narrowed as it hung above the river. Two wheels appeared to be always on the verge of slipping over the edge. A chute of loose stones followed our passage. Kuli Khan breathed heavily and murmured that he had in his dreams visited the tomb of the sainted Ali at Mazar-i-Sherif, but saw no likelihood of doing so in the flesh.

George remained unmoved. So did the driver who believed in speed. At one moment he said, "If I go quick enough, I do not see."

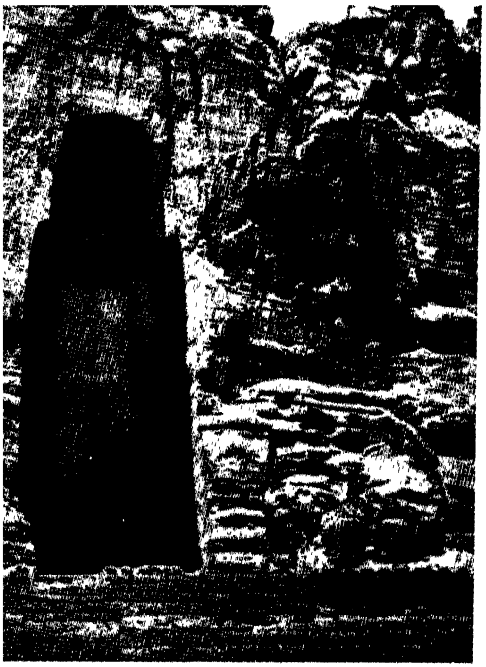
To this principle he adhered until we began to climb the Shibhar Pass. At 10,000 feet the snow was thick, but frozen into breakers on either side of the track. The bleakest villages in the world lay under the crest. They seemed to have taken root in the snow. Their low walls, immensely solid, were a continuation of the drifts. There was no sign of life. Animals and human beings had taken refuge under the flat roofs weighted with stones. Above us, in a splendour of desolation, the Pass reared with the effect of a heavy bird, its wings spread for flight. On the other side, the valleys fell steeply, one on top of another. The road became a thread drawn between towering cliffs.

Looking across the valley towards one of the giant Buddhas.

Photos, Capt. Galloway.



The 150-ft. Buddha above the village street at Bamyan.



The largest Buddha.

Photos, Capt. Galloway.

Detail of Bamyan cliffs, showing the caves that were once Buddhist monasteries.

To the protest of brakes and an anxious monologue from Kuli Khan, we descended between winged pinnacles of rock. They were redder than anything I had ever imagined. In Kabul people had tried to describe to me this particular redness. They had used all available similes and I had been prepared for the colouring of Arizona, accentuated by a background of snow. But when we turned Westwards, off the new track, I found that what I had supposed to be exaggeration was the mildest of under-statements. For the cliffs were the violent red of flames, and, like them, etiolated. Where the stream we had followed poured into the Surkhab, which is part of the Oxus watershed, it also was red. And Zohak, that ancient and mighty fortress, now so much a part of the cliff on which it has stood for 800 years or so that the ramparts and towers are no longer distinguishable from the rock, is the culmination of this fantastic carmine.

The rain had turned to hail. Mist shifted across the road. It was ice-cold. In spite of sheepskin-lined coats and knee-boots, we froze behind the open wind-screen. But the approach to Bamyan became more and more spectacular. The ghosts of poplars shivered in the fog. The earth seemed to smoke. Through the climbing vapour, we saw the ruins of a village. Light struck through the gaping windows. The walls were cardboard, the towers a stage effect. Then the mist closed and we drove through blanketed whiteness.

Kuli Khan muttered about ghosts and I wondered myself if what we had just seen were real. For the few remaining inhabitants of Bamyan believe that Shahr-i-Gholgola, the "place of sorrow," is haunted by a race of wolf-men who are human by day and animal at night. They attribute the loss of their cattle to the predatory instincts of these creatures who were once warriors, prematurely slaughtered by Genghiz Khan in revenge for the death of his grandson.

When the mist lifted, we found ourselves in a little valley. Furrows ran across it. The fields were bare and

separated by streams. A few fortress farms each with four towers rose solidly—earth out of earth. But on the nearer side a rampart of red rock climbed sheer to the snowline. It was porous with caves and split by the niches of giant Buddhas. Strange flying formations rose above the honeycomb town and the proud colour was slashed with green, rust brown, and indigo.

So I first saw Bamyan, Valley of the Buddhas—a confusion of mist, snow and an overpowering blood-red—with a procession of small men, red-bearded, coming in and out of the cliffs. When the wind caught them their clothes were blown backwards, so that I thought of them as walking half naked in the gale with great swirls of drapery as a background. So many clothes they wore and so little use they seemed to be!

The driver, who rarely spoke, said, "These men are children—so small. Have they, perhaps, nothing to eat?" He was a practical person, interested in the multiple concerns of his engine and his own inside.

CHAPTER XXI

THROUGH THE HINDU KUSH TO DOAB

IN A.D. 632, the celebrated Hiuan Tsang described Bamyan as a centre of art and commerce, a holy city of Buddhism, inhabited by thousands of monks and the goal of pilgrims from all parts of Asia. It was a market for the wares of China and India, and, after Balkh, the most important halting place on the "Silk Road" south of the Oxus.

A Byzantine traveller described the city of the valley destroyed by Genghiz Khan, of which no traces now remain, as "standing proudly, like Rome, at the cross-roads of the world."

To-day a clutter of mud hovels, wind-swept and flayed by dust, lie at the feet of the biggest Buddha, 150 feet high. On the opposite cliff the Afghan Government have built a comfortable modern rest-house.

The sight of this square, white-washed building was comforting in view of the hail which had driven into the lorry till we felt battered and out of shape. The twentieth century has its advantages. There were stoves in the rest-house and a bathroom with a primitive heating apparatus. There were also a number of cell-like rooms from which one should have had a view of the rock city. The rest-house was far enough away to command the whole expanse of cliff, pitted with caves and still inhabited by a few half-troglodyte people who kept their goats in the lower caverns and lived like birds in the least accessible holes they could find. But every window was covered with a thick white stuff. Through it nothing could be seen and these curtains fitted so closely that it was

impossible to contrive an aperture. So George and I spent the first half-hour taking them down, while Kuli Khan wandered in, asking, "Would you like mutton flan for dinner? There is no rice and I do not think a sheep has been killed."

We replied that we didn't mind what we ate provided it were hot. Kuli Khan drifted away. No other man could express such depths of foreboding. While we leaned upon the sills, enchanted by a spectacle sufficiently remarkable to be included among the seven or seventy wonders still left to us, Kuli Khan returned with the news that he couldn't cook. "You have taken all the wood for baths. There is no fire left. You will be very clean, but how can you eat?"

We begged him to show a little of that resource for which he was famous, but the situation was not sufficiently unsatisfactory. Kuli Khan had decided on tins, and nothing would deflect him from his purpose.

We spent the evening making up the fire, for the stove was voracious. It ate wood faster than we could provide it. In alternate spells of heat and cold we studied maps and decided upon the length of exposure suited to our various lenses, for Bamyan is difficult to photograph. Either the dark entrances of cells, passages and shrines are so confused with the organ-like structure of the cliffs that they disappear among a multitude of shadows, or, over-emphasised, they incline to the form of warts upon a tormented body.

While we yawned and smoked, Kuli Khan made his last appearance. He spoke of baths as if, like Moses, he had conjured them from the rock. A fearful steam came with him. Choking, we followed him along the passage. The bathroom seemed ablaze. We had to shout above the roaring of the heating apparatus. The water hissed and spat as it burst from the taps. There were other frantic noises. Kuli Khan looked delighted. He enjoyed havoc. "Perhaps something will burst," he said.

George did all that was possible to prevent catastrophe,

and got very black in the process. "We'd better leave it to cool down," he suggested.

This was essential, for something had happened to the cold water. With infinite satisfaction Kuli Khan was able to announce that it would not work.

Eventually I got my bath, but the water was the colour of beetroot; a thick sediment coated the sides of the tub. Soap added the effect of cream on the best Bortsch. It occurred to me that bathing in champagne or asses' milk was cheap compared with such an extravagance of soap.

Next morning we found all the curtains in place again. As a race the Afghans are peculiarly afraid of criticism. They do not even ask like all South Americans, "What do you think of our country?" They don't want to know. They don't want the tourists whom other countries regard as manna from Heaven. They want to be left alone to go as far as they please, but no further. They have so much of which to be proud, but it is not enough. Behind closed curtains and a guarded frontier, they are safe from criticism.

What effect does it have on a man's nature to live without a view? The houses of Afghanistan have always been secretive. Within high walls and blind walls they keep themselves to themselves. They represent the antithesis of the Russian warrens, where flat-dwellers share everything that for a thousand years has been included in the Mohammedan religion of privacy.

After relays of eggs provided by a despairing Kuli Khan, we tramped across the valley. The wind was an iced razor-blade and the snows blue-white above the blazing cliffs. By daylight, Shahr-i-Gholgola was less ghostly. It was difficult to believe in the wolf-men. The small boy who trudged with us showed scepticism, but he told us the tale of the king's daughter who fell in love with Jelal-ed-Din at the inconvenient moment when, at the head of Genghiz Khan's army, he was attacking the town. For

his sake she betrayed her people, and she did it in a manner which proved her ingenuity. From a bow of exceptional size she shot an arrow into Jelal-ed-Din's camp. Attached to the shaft was a message explaining that if he cut off the city's water supply he and his men could creep in at night by the empty conduits. For this information she claimed a promise of marriage. Jelal-ed-Din gave it, but, according to legend, he killed the lady on their wedding night because "she who had been dangerous to many men might be even more dangerous to one."

For hours we climbed about the cliffs and at the most giddy moments I insisted on reading extracts from a leaflet written in French by an archeologist who was not a historian. Dutifully following his directions we found the circular cavern with its bas-relief of faces, some of them more like pigs than wolves. We clambered up behind the shoulders of the largest Buddha and stood upon his head under an arch of rock, while the wind did its best to dislodge us and fragments of peeling frescoes fell upon our heads. Pursuing the past, we went between recurrent light and darkness into the depths of what were once hermitages and temples. We found a good many of them inhabited by gnome-like men with thickets of fiery beard, and by thin, small women whose eyes had burned into their heads. Before our feet failed us we'd learned something of the extent of Bamyan and were willing to credit Hiuan Tsang's tale of pilgrims by the thousand hospitably entertained by Buddhist monks, but I could not imagine the city as it had been when it defied the Mongols. Since Bamyan held up the enemy advance, it must have been a fortified town like Balkh, whose ramparts are still imposing, but in all history there can never have been destruction more complete than that which was wrought at the foot of the indestructible Buddhas by the orders of Genghiz Khan.

There is nothing left in the valley.

Between furrows and swollen streams we made our way back to the gorges of the Kush. Kuli Khan was com-

paratively cheerful. In his opinion it was impolite to linger on the way when at the end of it Sherif Ali waited. To the Moslem, whether Shia or Sunni, a tomb is a person and death no interruption to the continuance of a relationship. So Kuli Khan spoke cheerfully of going to see the son-in-law of the Prophet and made no mention of the Sherif's death. The hospitality of Ali would continue so long as there were Faithful to visit him.

"We must hurry," said Kuli Khan anxiously. He was not interested in the road. Chikar and the shooting of them he regarded as an interruption. But the driver and the greaser whom we called "Deadly Nightshade" were sportsmen. They saw partridges where there were only stones. When we passed a camel caravan, bound at a bare two miles an hour for the Southern bank of the Oxus, they asked eagerly after game. And the dark, bearded gypsy men who'd brought their merchandise from the ports of the Indian Ocean, kindly invented animals which they called "lions." After that we were in imminent danger of leaving the track for the river bed.

For 34 miles, between Bulda and Doab-i-Mezhari, the road crept between cliffs several thousand feet high. They were striped with the colours of old metal and showed traces of copper, lead, manganese and nickel. There was no trace of vegetation until, from the width of a few feet where the river and road together forced themselves through a cleft without sight of the sky, the gorge widened and forked to embrace a hill with an old fort on the crest.

Willows and fruit trees appeared at Jalmask, but Doab, where we spent the night, was sunk below a table-land of cliffs. The horizontal strata were of different colours and the whole formation looked like Edinburgh rock, but on a grand scale. The Hindu Kush has no fear of overdoing the effect. The rest-house at Doab was unfinished. Carpenters still worked on the roof. Pipes and other appurtenances of plumbing lay about in the mud. A

shaggy mass of camels sheltered against the walls. Men as dark and ragged camped among their merchandise. They had come from the plains round Mazar, and they were Turkomans with the flat cheekbones and narrow eyes of their Mongol origin. From the few booths beside the road drifted an uncertain smoke. Having arranged the scattered beds and tables to suit our needs and sent a tall man in a magnificently flowered chapan to look for a receptacle in which to wash, we went out to buy meat.

By this time it was dusk. The camels were a dark tide lapping against the shore. The rest-house stood like a cliff above the movement of men and beasts.

We found the booths empty, so we turned up the road to stretch our legs. Down it came a succession of unkempt figures, worn and thin. They were the first tramps we'd seen. For, in Afghanistan, the village is a unit and the land divided between the members of a family. The code of Islam (Sheria) still prevails. By it and by traditional law, no man who has relations need fear starvation. Each of the feudal farms, as solid as a fortress within its walls, harbours three and even four generations and a number of hangers-on who work for their keep and clothes. No serfs or slaves are acknowledged in Afghanistan, but the children of retainers serve in the houses where they are born. Apart from the villages where every male contributes his share of labour, for Islam is one of the earliest forms of socialism, there are only the nomads, whose life is even more communal, or the shepherds, relations or henchmen of the flock-owners.

Outside the towns of Kandahar, Kabul and Herat, there is little hired labour. Each family looks after its own, and in the south there is little difference in wealth, for all depend on the land and what it produces. Only Amanullah attempted to build palaces out of keeping with the wealth of the country. Modern Afghans live nearly as simply as their forebears. They find their pleasures in sport, tea-drinking and chikar fighting; a lute, or, if some relative

has travelled, an ancient gramophone, seem to occupy the leisure of the masses.

If there are no signs of luxury between the Khyber and the Oxus, there is also no indication of poverty. Villagers and townsfolk appear to be prosperous. In fact, the people are richer than the Government.

Until we reached the Kush, I saw no destitute, and beggars were conspicuous by their absence. But Mazar is a holy city and it was the season of the New Year pilgrimage. From every part of Asia, in wind-blown March, came pilgrims to the Shia Mecca.

Many of them apparently supported themselves on what the charitable offered. Like ghosts they slipped through the valleys of the Hindu Kush. They carried nothing but a stick. Their inadequate garments flapped behind them. Their sandals were split, or their rough felt leggings torn. Some of them looked as if they hadn't eaten for days. Where they slept I don't know. Limping and glassy-eyed they came from the dusk to disappear into the night. But one stopped us. He said there was a woman ill. We were foreigners. We must be doctors. We could give her medicine and she would be cured.

He led us to a mud shelter full of dung. It had been intended for goats. Two or three newly born kids huddled in a corner. In another crouched a tragic figure. It was shrivelled beyond sex or age. Its limbs were bent in a fashion suggesting paralysis or arthritis. But the youth who had brought us said it was a fever.

The woman did not speak. Her matted hair hung loose and mingled with the dirt. Her arms and legs were covered with mud. The boy whom we took to be her son treated her as if she were inanimate, moving her and straightening her limbs for our inspection. "She is tired, that is all," he said.

We gave him money for food and something that might relieve his mother's pain.

"She is not my mother. She's my wife," he said.

George, surprised into impulsive speech, exclaimed, "But she's so old!"

The lad shrugged his shoulders. "Yes. I hadn't enough money for anything better. But I'm going to Mazar of the Sherif. If I make money, I will buy a younger wife. You are right. She is too old, that one."

CHAPTER XXII

MIDNIGHT ON THE MAZAR PASS

We left Doab soon after it was light, but the camels had already gone. While I was trying to wash, in a chased silver basin rather larger than a breakfast cup, I heard them grunting as the bales were adjusted. Then they swelled past the window, their loads tossing in the half light like timber on a flood.

While Kuli Khan drooped about the lorry, and the driver fussed because he had lost a tool he couldn't describe, we walked beside the river. It was an ugly maroon colour. The rocks towered into immense pipes, violently red and yellow. Later on, they were a curiously hot purple powdered with snow.

The gorge continued for twenty-three miles to Talla, after which we came out of the mountains and found ourselves in a waste of crumpled hills. They were utterly arid and of a strange greyish gold. We left the lorry, to take photographs, and when it was out of sight we might as well have been on some lunar tableland. Nothing grew. There were no birds, no sign of animal life. Far away on the horizon lay the snows of the second range we had to cross, but in between there was nothing but dead hills indescribably bleak, more frozen in their ashen yellow than if they had been covered with rime.

After traversing this silent land reft from the moon, we entered a narrow valley, pleasantly cultivated. It grew wider. Grass spread beside the stream and we saw the first yurts, precursors of Turkestan. These round, mushroom-like structures cluster in circles on the plains of Central Asia. They are the dwellings of Mongol nomads, of Usbegs, Tartars and Tadjiks, of the shepherds

and the herdsmen who pack their belongings on bullock-back and move with the change of seasons.

These yurts are the equivalent of the black camel-hair tents which do not change between Jerusalem and Kabul, but they are made of reed matting mounted on curved poles. They are lined with strips of felt and covered with a goat's-hair cloth, bound down with ropes of hide.

In Central Asia every country begins before its authorised frontier. Peshawar is much more Afghan than Indian, and now, between the two ranges of the Kush, we found ourselves in the Steppes. Pathans had disappeared with their fortified villages. Here were unarmed riders, with smooth, round faces and short legs. Their horses were small and well bred. The loose, long-ended turbans had gone with the bearded men of the South. Apple cheeks bloomed under fair hair and neatly wound headgear. The riders wore knee-length coats (chapans) of cotton heavily wadded and of the brightest colours. Their legs were encased in knee-boots and their stirrups shaped like coal shovels.

Forty-two miles beyond Talla, we came upon the first caraculi sheep. They were black, brown and grey, with closely curled fleeces, and in this distant valley, shut away among the hills, inhabited by nomads who have never seen a town or heard of a railway, they represented trade born of fashion. For these sheepskins acquire a dozen different names before, as the best broadtail, they sell for fabulous prices in Bond Street and the Rue de la Paix. In Northern Afghanistan a ram is worth about 1500 Afghanis, and a ewe 80 to 100. The unborn lamb, called tagher, fetches 120 to 140 Afghanis according to its colour—grey and brown are more valuable than black—but the ewe has to be killed to get the best skin.

Two rams serve some five hundred ewes. The small farmers possess flocks of about this size. The big men may have fifteen or sixteen flocks, each numbering a thousand head. The poorest of all have a few caraculi sheep running with their goats. They keep any ewe

lambs born and sell the males, or use their skins as currency on a journey. North of the Kush caraculi are liable to take the place of petty cash. The big men send their skins in bulk to Russia, but there are always shepherds who will sell uncured skins, still raw and bleeding, for the price of a few meals or some bitter green tobacco.

Two hundred and fifteen miles from Kabul, we came to Dowshi, which is a real Turkoman serai on the edge of the Steppes. There is no village. Booths made of straw matting had been set up at the confluence of the Andarab and Surkhab rivers. In front of them were collected a number of riders. Their horses were tethered within arm's reach. The wind of the Steppes played with the dust and tossed manes and tails into the air. A baker sat in the open surrounded by breads. He was making them one after another in a hole scooped out of the earth. He had only a handful of charcoal, but the cakes of bread which he whisked out of his primitive oven and spread round him, flat as pancakes, were excellent and very hot. We bought some and settled down on the pushtins in the shelter of a wall. In front of us a bridge that looked as if it were made of nothing but straw spanned the main river. The road had disappeared, but where it should have been there was a general impression of tea-pots and painted straw tents.

The crowd soon left their tea-drinking for the more unusual amusement provided by the sight of strangers eating out of pots. An enormous goat established himself beside us, and George used him as a waste-paper basket. For his appetite was voracious and unquestioning.

When we were at our stickiest and silted over with dust, a commotion on the other side of the bridge indicated the arrival of a personage. It turned out to be no less than the Foreign Minister, who had been shooting in a neighbouring valley. A lorry full of soldiers preceded him. A headman materialised out of the dust.

George went to meet the procession. In some remarkable way he had ceased to look smeared with butter,

crumby, or dust-stained. With becoming gravity, the two men conversed. Together they walked across the flimsy bridge. In another moment, to the awed amusement of the spectators, the Foreign Minister had seated himself amidst the fragments of lunch upon the pushtin. He had just returned from England. Doubtless he remembered that even dukes sat in ditches to eat in a maximum of discomfort the indigestible food considered essential to shooters. So he carried off the unusual situation with the ease of manner habitual to his countrymen.

Kuli Khan was impressed. He produced coffee with an air of other concessions to follow. The crowd thickened. The goat indicated that he was still hungry. Several soldiers in tin helmets became officious. With a few sentences the Foreign Minister dispersed our mutual admirers. "I've sent them to pray," he said, "so they will be better occupied. It is mid-day."

The goat, being a heathen, remained with us.

While we drank green tea, which tasted less realistic than Kuli Khan's coffee, we enquired about the state of the road.

"We want to reach Haibak to-night."

"Haibak?" exclaimed the Minister, as if he doubted the very existence of the town. He continued to look disconcerted while he murmured: "Well—providing it does not rain——"

We all looked at the sky. Then, spurred by the evident distance of Haibak, we began our farewells. The Minister pressed upon us pheasants and a duck. With another startled glance at the sun, he begged us to hurry. We did so, with the result that half the bridge fell down—fortunately behind us.

For a few miles we kept to the valley, which was little more than the river bed. Then we came to the grass lands, in which the road as such ceased to exist. Vague ruts ran across a green desert. The lorry bucked over hillocks of every shape and size. Its action reminded me

of many a good day's hunting with plenty of fences and deep plough between them.

After several hours, in which we had made negligible progress, George said, "Intelligent fellow, the Foreign Minister." It was becoming evident to both of us that we should not arrive at Haibak. Later, we wondered if we should ever arrive anywhere.

But the plains were beautiful. It was the first time I'd seen such an expanse of green, smooth, rolling green, lush as silk and with the sheen and shadows of silk. In all that world, there was no other colour but green, until, emerging from the great, verdant dunes, we saw, far off, a blue-white snow-line. Near at hand was a nomad encampment. The yurts were dark growths among the grass and towards them, slowly, there came from every side a black tide of sheep.

The afternoon waned, and we drove westwards straight into the sun.

"It's the wrong direction," I said helplessly.

"Yes," said George. "We'll probably find ourselves back at Kabul."

The green continued, but it was fecund with young animals. Camels and their foals stood knee-deep in what appeared to be pools of lilac water—but they were flowers. Herds of wild horses galloped by with their tails streaming in the wind. A gentle dusk fell upon the plain and fires began to glimmer among the scattered encampments. Riders hurried past us. The hoofs of their small, sturdy horses made no sound. Their rifle-barrels gleamed in the pale clarity that belonged neither to the day nor the night. While this half-light continued we came to a large and straggling village, whose houses seemed to have been transported from another country. Nothing could have been more alien to the Steppes. For, within an outer ring of yurts and straw hovels huddled a collection of the square mud dwellings familiar to the Punjab. They were indescribably dirty and forlorn. From them came people equally waif-like, who spoke to us in a tongue that was

neither Persian nor Pushtu. Patiently George questioned, and they answered, "Aa-oh." Changing his tactics, he indulged in a slow and cheerful monologue. Gradually, a few distinctive sounds punctuated the repetition of "Aa-oh."

"That's better," said George. "They're getting used to us."

By this time Kuli Khan must have been considerably shaken, for since lunch he had bounced continually between the roof of the lorry and the baggage which now rolled about inside it, but he leaned cautiously above us and produced an entirely new speech. The Ishmaels who stood round us, wild, dark and terrified, began to show signs of understanding.

"You can't hurry them," said George. "You've got to give them time to gape at us and decide we're human." He began to talk about the places we'd come from and the state of the road. "No use asking a question—they won't answer."

But Kuli Khan was still crooning in clipped syllables and eventually one of the tattered men said, "Ghori—Aaoh."

Kuli Khan looked perplexed. "I think," he said, "this place must be Ghori—unless, of course, it's Aaoh—but why it's here at all I can't imagine."

He asked for information on this point, and the men's heads sunk suddenly between their shoulder-blades. Not another word came from them.

Defeated, we bumped past the disreputable village. It sprawled like a disease upon the lovely plain which still contrived to look untrodden and immune. Sombre men, in type neither Pathan nor Mongol, shambled past us, their coats bulging with young animals. From between the torn wadding peered the delicious, intelligent faces of kids and the less responsive ones of newly-born lambs. Beyond the last houses was a tea-khané of the roughest description. The owner had faded to the colour of clay, but he still had the use of his tongue. While we drank a muddy liquid that bore little resemblance to tea, and George, who liked feeding things, attempted to ruin the digestion

The upper half of the giant Buddha.

Photos, Capt. Galloway.

The valley of Bamyan, seen from the head of the giant Buddha.

Above, the foothills leading to the first range of the Hindu Kush.

Below, Doab-i-Mezhari, where the Afghan Government is building a rest-house.

of a wild white horse with yeastless bread, he told us that the dumb people, who still looked as if they were exiles, had been transported from the neighbourhood of Kabul forty years ago. They were Chinzais and they had proved too turbulent for the local authorities, so, bag and baggage, they had been moved north of the Kush, and they hadn't yet got used to it!

While we talked, a gaily-painted lorry blundered through the mud, to disgorge a mass of passengers in front of the tea-house. Among them Kuli Khan found an acquaintance from whom he had separated at Dowshi. With hands clasped, they gazed ecstatically at each other and at the wild grass country, shadowed now and formless.

"Come with us," urged Kuli Khan, for friendship to him was like food. It was also very beautiful. He could not bear to be parted again from this new, this satisfactory friend.

The other protested, "You cannot go over the pass to-night, and you cannot go to-morrow or for many days, because it will snow—yes, within a few hours, it will snow."

That decided us. Kuli Khan was reft from his friend, who immediately began to argue with the driver of the painted lorry. He paused to call after us, "God will look after you, but fear not, for I myself will assuredly be behind you."

That was the last we saw of him.

Dusk fell and the Steppes had no end. For ever, it seemed to us, we should jolt across the yielding dunes that were grass instead of sand. Camp-fires outnumbered the stars. It seemed to me that heaven and earth were confused, so that the planets burned at our feet and the sky was full of sparks.

Shortly after leaving Ghori things began to happen. They happened mostly to the engine, and the driver spent his time bent over it or lying under it. In a cloud of perfume "Deadly Nightshade" leaped about the lorry searching for tools. Kuli Khan, less mournful than usual, produced a lamp.

In darkness I sat upon a mud-heap and wondered how soon it would begin to snow. "The radiator's leaking," said George, "and there's a choke in the feed-pipe. I think one wheel's a bit loose. It won't take long."

After an hour or so we started again. Strange noises went with us. Our lamps were less effective than the stars. When there wasn't even a yurt within sight, they went out. I suggested camping for the night. It seemed to me impossible to negotiate an unknown pass, probably deep in snow, without lights, but we had no tent, we were averse to clearing the lorry, and the temperature was Arctic. The deciding factor, of course, was the storm. We must get over the Mazar Pass while it was still open.

Slowly we progressed across invisible country. Sometimes Kuli Khan walked ahead. His exhaustion had disappeared. Even his voice changed. He was quite willing now to instruct the driver, advise George, put up beds, conjure food, lamps, extra clothing, from the welter of baggage with which he alone seemed able to cope. But we would not wait for him to display his talents.

I don't remember how many breakdowns we had before we reached the serai at Robatak, but by then it must have been about ten. The radiator had acquired the habits of a sponge. The brakes were slipping.

At Robatak, therefore, we woke the keeper of the serai and asked how far it was to the Pass. "Far, no," he said. "But high! So high it goes, it must reach heaven." He looked at the outline of the khaki beast couchant beneath the walls. "Your lorry may do it," he said, "but no other would." And at that moment a frightened man panted towards us, crying that a truck had gone over the edge of the Pass, the driver had been killed, everybody had been killed except the driver who could be heard screaming. He paused for breath. Perhaps, as there were so many screams, nobody had been entirely killed, but——"

The keeper of the serai asked where the accident had happened—on the Haibak side? Yes. He drew a long breath of relief. No effort would be required from him.

Fat and shapeless, he abhorred activity. While we asked him if we could sleep in the serai, we saw his features dissolve in the light of the hurricane lamp he carried. They wavered into a patchwork of uncertainty and the man himself drifted away from us, a jelly-fish into the darkness of the sea. Bereft of a guide, we pushed past a door-keeper and through the great arch into the serai. It was a huge open square surrounded by mud walls and in the thickness of these were windowless cubicles inhabited by men and animals.

Blundering about in the darkness, it was as if we looked into the cells of a man's brain and saw his thoughts as well as the actions to which they gave rise. For when we'd negotiated the mass of camels, bales and wadded drivers huddled about the yard, George opened the door of one room after another. In the first a man who had taken off his turban and looked, therefore, strangely naked in spite of his coats and knee-boots, stood with a knife in his hand. He was alone. His eyes glittered and he didn't move when we appeared.

Next door, a mare kicked at us and a small, hairless person twisted into the corner and lay with his head on his arms.

Further on, a husband made love to his wife. Both stared at us unblushing and said nothing.

In the last cubicle, three men sat round a pan of charcoal. Their heads were bent together. They talked in low voices. As soon as they saw us, they made a move towards the rifles stacked in the corner. There was a smell of sweat, dung, tobacco and something else. The presence of a solitary camel saddle—the padding can so easily be stuffed with charras—suggested smuggling, but we saw only the men's fear.

In the opposite cubicle, which we imagined empty, we fell over a lump of something living. I think it was composed of sheep and shepherd sleeping together for warmth.

Under the arch, within reach of the huge metal-studded

door, there was a better room with rugs on the floor. But it was inhabited by a large and evil-smelling family who had already made the most intimate preparations for the night. Abashed, we backed out, and stepped immediately into the supper of some Kochis. A dish upset. A man cursed while he scrambled on all fours among the food. The camel which he was using as a pillow reared to its knees. In the subsequent confusion we fled.

"Better sleep in the lorry," I suggested. "There'll be some air."

"Too much," expostulated George.

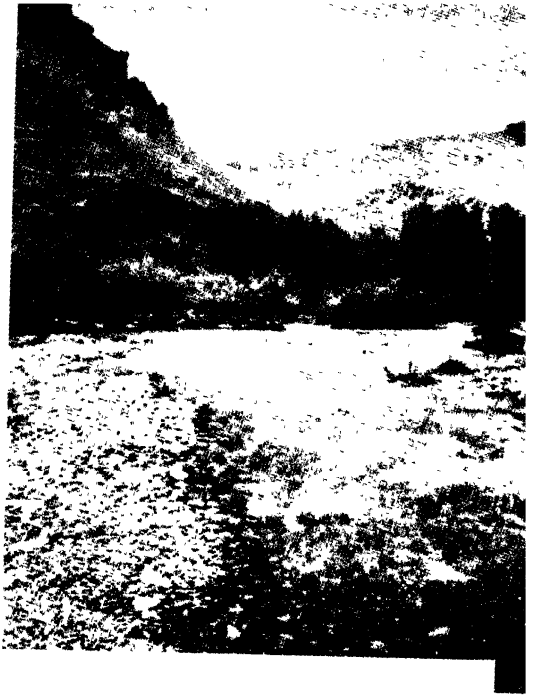
"Not enough to ventilate 'Deadly Nightshade.'"

But Kuli Khan came to meet us. "The engine is going," he said. "I will sit on the mudguard with a lamp. The pass is near—in an hour we shall be over it." His tone implied that we were making a great fuss about nothing.

Supported by the driver, he had his way. We started. We stopped. We tinkered. Eventually we reached the foot of the Mazar Pass. In a series of hairpin bends the road shot out of sight. We crawled after it. Snow and frozen mud had drifted into twin breakers. Between these we could see the ruts made by the lorry that had gone over the edge. But we could see little else. A yard to the right the drop was invisible, but occasionally we heard a stone fall.

On bottom gear we crept along the base of the cliff. Its solidity was reassuring. Every hundred yards or so we had to stop, for the engine was overheating and in spite of chains the wheels could not grip. They spun helpless in the slime, and when we skidded only a rim of ice-bound scarlet mud separated us from the precipice. It was a curious situation, for we could do nothing to minimise the risk. From the front bench, with the greaser breathing heavily over my shoulder, I saw Kuli Khan crouched upon the outer mudguard and beyond him the snow breakers rearing up against a wall of darkness. George walked behind, putting stones under the wheels whenever we

In the Hindu Kush.



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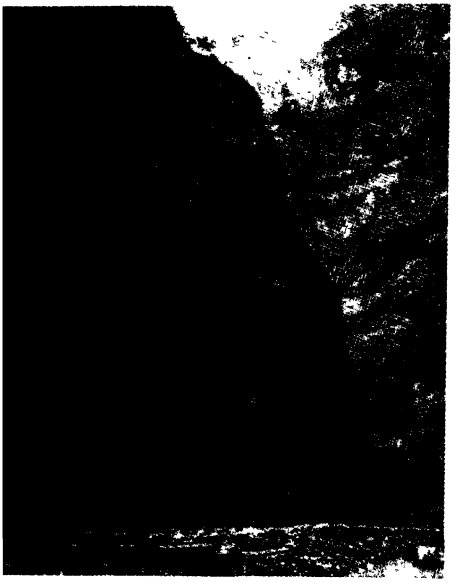
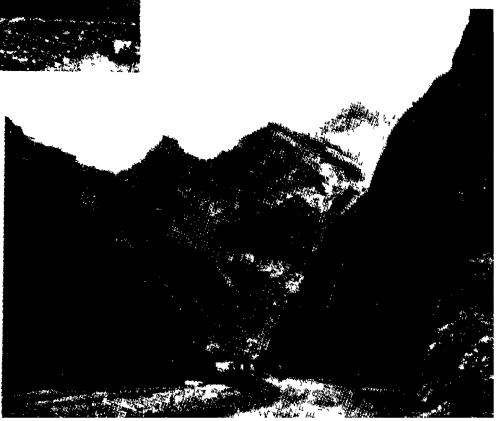


Dara Shikari, the gorge deep in the Hindu Kush. The bridge on the left is the only one in the gorge.

Photos, Capt. Gallow



showed signs of going backwards instead of forwards. Occasionally he said, "We can't be far from the top." But it was too cold to talk.

On the steepest slope, the lorry settled down with a bump. After a hurried application of stones, the driver buried himself under the bonnet. Kuli Khan produced a scrag-end of meat. From it we tore strips and ate them in our fingers. If possible, it grew colder.

By this time, hours had ceased to exist. The night had become an indefinite period. I saw no reason why it should ever end. We got out and pushed. The engine made noises. We pushed harder. The mud spat into our faces.

Then the pump burst and clouds of smoke poured from the engine. At this moment the moon chose to sail out of the clouds and we saw the pass which we'd imagined close at hand suspended far above us like a cable between two posts.

Till then the driver had been silent. But when the pump had been mended and the whole lorry ransacked to find new plugs, he made his first remark. "Had I known," he said, "we should not have come——" But Kuli Khan interrupted with a reminder of Ali waiting at Mazar-i-Sherif.

"If Allah wills, we shall greet the Sherif in heaven!" retorted the driver.

For another immeasurable period we crawled upwards. Like a mule, the lorry seemed to prefer the outside edge. With two wheels on the border of eternity we slithered and twisted with the track until it seemed to us a living thing which we pursued into the darkness. To keep warm, we took turns with the stones which in moments of doubt —and they were frequent—had to be forced under the wheels.

I don't think any of us knew when we crossed the pass. The moon had gone. So had the fan belt. But the darkness was slipping away from us and the figure of Kuli Khan humped on the mudguard acquired a new

perspective. "There is no more top," he called to us. The lorry began to buck like a hard-held colt.

At a terrifying pace we went downwards. George had become an image. The driver was clamped about the wheel. Kuli Khan lay flat upon the bonnet, but he still held the light. "What's happened?" I asked, but nobody spoke. We were roaring down like a canoe caught in the rapids. Corners rushed at us and were gone. In a welter of stones and mud, with a screech of gears and a long-drawn hiss from the engine, we rocked over obstacles that we could not see. Below us lay wave after wave of hills. There appeared to be no end to them. Frozen and still, their crests filled an immensity of space that reached beyond our vision. The world had never seemed so large and so uninhabited.

An upheaval flung me against George. The lorry heeled and hesitated. "It's all right," said my British companion. "The hand-brake's gone."

Somewhere a dog barked. The road straightened. It acquired shape and purpose. "A village! There must be a village——" muttered the greaser, who had been exuding fear. But it was a long time before the succeeding hills gave way.

At last, when we'd given up all hope of arriving anywhere at any time, we saw a ghostly castle reared upon a mound. Its walls had crumbled. Its towers looked like decayed molars. "Haibak," came in a tenuous whisper from Kuli Khan, but the streets were deserted. On either side gaped empty houses. The doors were gone and the holes that had been windows peered with the effect of eyeless sockets.

Through this scarecrow town we went, searching for somebody alive, but there wasn't a sound or a movement. Kuli Khan left his post on the mudguard. I understood that he objected to ghosts and indeed, in the shivering grey light precursor of the dawn, I felt we might quite well meet something headless or otherwise odd.

Even George was affected by the spectral effect of a

town without a single inhabitant. He said, "D'you think it was an earthquake, or no water?" but his voice became more normal when we saw a light.

Kuli Khan, with teeth chattering, leaped from the lorry and pursued it, although, as he afterwards explained, he felt "in his stomach" that it might be a ghoul if not one of those luminous serpents which lure travellers into a waterless desert, or a swamp according to the amenities of the latitude.

The light turned out to be a lantern held in the shaky hand of an old man who, hearing our shouts and fearing robbers, had decided to hide himself and his few pieces of silver in the well. Assured of his quarry's human origin, Kuli Khan soon frustrated this purpose. With one leg over the well and the Indian's hands half throttling him, the man choked and argued. George came to the rescue. "What has happened to Haibak?" he asked.

"Nothing."

For a moment the two of them glared at each other. Then it transpired that we had come to the wrong Haibak. The other, the new town, which was very fine—the old man registered awe—lay in a different direction.

"Will you show us the way?" We offered money, but our victim, who wore only a long cotton night-shirt and a skull-cap, said he was too old. He shook as if he had an ague, but we wouldn't let him go until he dragged from a bed of rags and straw in the corner of a mud hovel a grandson, who appeared to be half-witted.

In spite of Kuli Khan's reassurances, uttered in the voice of a mother to her first child, the boy would not put on any clothes, nor would he get into the lorry, which no doubt seemed to him a monster. While we backed and turned, the boy ran bare-footed into the country, his cotton slip blowing behind him, his knees so bowed that he looked like a fat, white frog hopping frenziedly in front of us.

"We can't let him go on like this," I protested. "He'll burst——"

But Kuli Khan was ruthless. "We must find some place to sleep, although it is long after to-morrow when we must immediately go on." The confusion of thought indicated exhaustion, for Kuli Khan's pessimism was usually presented in the fewest and most destructive words.

The boy continued to run until we instructed "Deadly Nightshade" to catch him and force him into the lorry. There followed a sharp struggle on the step. Prayers rocketed to Heaven. I held a very dirty handkerchief to my nose. Fortunately the boy escaped, leaving his night-shirt behind him; he slid like an eel into some bushes.

A little later, we found Haibak. The road ran suddenly into a modern bazaar with a rest-house at the end of it. Under its adequate roof, Kuli Khan's pessimism returned. "There is no furniture but beds," he said.

"What else d'you want?" I asked.

Words failed the Indian. He set a bucket on one bed, the lamp on another, and went out, trailing his gloom as a garment.

CHAPTER XXIII

IN A BACK GARDEN

HAIBAK is on the way to being a modern town. Its new houses are solidly constructed. Trees have been planted in the middle of a stony plain and public gardens planned. There are to be Government offices and barracks, but at present it is mid-way between a building-site and one of those camps which in America grow up every week at the prospect of oil or a new mine.

Beyond Haibak, a scrag end of country, neither hill nor plain, leads to the incredible pass of Tashkurgan, where the road is threaded between immense crimson cliffs. The sky disappears.

Here is the last natural defence of Afghanistan against invasion from the north. Beyond lie the sandy plains of Mazar-i-Sherif, and the great dune desert south of the Oxus. Towards this historic river, now called the Amu Darya, lead the Russian roads and railways, but they stop short at the northern bank. There is neither ferry nor ford. South of the mile-wide stream, boundary between the last stronghold of religious feudalism and a socialism no less autocratic, Afghan divisions at Mazar-i-Sherif keep watch in the direction of Termez and Khilif, where Alexander the Great is supposed to have crossed the Oxus, while others further east, at Herat and Maimana, devote the same attention to Russian Kushk. But, in effect, it is the Hindu Kush which guards the road to Kabul.

Three of the passes could be held by a company against an army corps, and in a hundred miles there is scarcely camping-space for a battalion. Between Haibak and Tashkurgan we passed a number of pilgrims bound for the holy city. The family processions made friezes across

the landscape. They were decorative and charming. The men wore their best embroidered waistcoats under chapans of many colours. They were country-folk, shepherds or small farmers, and they brought their wives and daughters with them. The women wore a mass of brilliant stripes and on their heads curiously shaped coifs with yards of white veil floating behind them. They were very shy and they twisted some of the white material over their faces when I approached. They were all frightened of the lorry, and when we offered one of the men a lift he refused to face such peril alone.

All of them spoke of their "visit to the Sherif Ali" as if they had dressed themselves up for Sunday lunch with a relative. Although they had been walking or riding on bullocks for days or weeks in the mountains, they looked cheerful and clean. It was obvious they meant to enjoy themselves.

One party offered us tea set on a rug in mid plain, but they would not risk coming within a hundred yards of the lorry. "A good thing," said the driver, "for who knows what would have happened to them!" And he told us of a friend who had given a sick man a lift to Kabul and had subsequently been imprisoned for murder because his passenger died as a result of the bumping.

The cleft at Tashkurgan left us breathless. For half a mile the space between the cliffs was scarcely more than the lorry's breadth. Then the road ran out into apricot gardens and we saw an old fort clinging to a hill. Its multitude of towers were broken and its ramparts sagged, but it had a solid kinship with the earth out of which it had grown. Below it, like huge clay eggs, were the domed roofs of houses that might have been ovens. They were set neatly about with gardens and blossom broke over their walls. George and I climbed perilously by way of a conduit till, from an opposing hill, we could photograph the leviathan fortress sprawling above pomegranate and cherry orchards. Behind it the mountains were red, blue and purple. They rose sheer out of the desert. The sands were red-gold

and they stretched to the horizon where a faint white line showed the snows across the Oxus.

George said, "D'you think it's real?" and we decided, out of deference to the scenery, that we must lunch by a stream under fruit trees. But all the gardens were enclosed within high walls, and the lanes between them were deserted. At last we found a tea-booth whose owner opened a very ordinary door and led us straight into a Persian miniature. There were the same quaintly artificial trees and birds in cages and a broken fountain. We went a little further and found our orchard. Under the reddest blossom we sat in a dry ditch, one bank supporting our spines and the other our knees. It was a position of delectable comfort, but one which made any quick movement impossible. Kuli Khan disapproved because it was not seemly that a British officer and a lady with a red feather in her hat should sit among lucerne in the back garden of a nobody, and enjoy it beyond any possibility of doubt. With growing gloom he spread food beside us and the owner of the house brought a row of cracked tea-pots and arranged them neatly at the bottom of the ditch.

I've rarely been so happy. It was warm, the sun shone. There was plenty to eat. The bank fitted admirably into my back. George buttered things and found things which I dropped and quoted the incomparable Ling, a Chinese philosopher who was never out of countenance, even when partially hanged.

The tea, of course, tasted like brackish water, but the mountains made up for it. I still didn't believe in them, and when the door of the garden opened and Kuli Khan precipitated himself through it, followed by a procession of unsuitable figures, I thought they were all part of the illusion.

Kuli Khan tried to speak before he reached us, but misery had made him inaudible. With agonised eyes he stood over us and besought us to rise. "It is the great," he said. "They were expecting you. The Foreign Minister had sent news. A magnificent lunch is prepared——"

Breathlessly, he enumerated the courses, while with his body he tried to hide the traces of our meal. There was a great deal of it spread about the ditch and scattered over our persons. An egg had burst upon my skirt. George was smeared with over-ripe banana.

Making a feeble effort to alter my posture, which was definitely that of reclining, I upset several tea-pots. Kuli Khan looked as if he were about to burst into tears, but George succeeded in rising not only to his feet but to the occasion. Imperceptibly, he left the ditch. In exquisite Persian, he addressed the deputation, which stood knee-deep in the lucerne trying not to express its dismay. After the first blameless periods, I began to wonder if George ever *had* been in the ditch. A few crumbs clung to him. There was mud on his shoulders, but his manner successfully conveyed the impression of a favour bestowed. The deputation relaxed. They began to make gestures indicative of welcome. George, splendidly ignoring the tatters of cold mutton about his feet, implied a hunger that could only be satisfied by the feast provided for us.

In another moment, we should be headed for the official residence. Protesting, I looked at my watch. A scandalised Kuli Khan begged me to hide it. "There is no time here——" he said, removing all that I still hoped to eat.

George held out a hand. The movement did not interfere with his speech which flowed mellifluously over such matters as our appreciation of the Foreign Minister's courtesy and the uncertainties of travel both in England and Afghanistan. Ignominiously I was hauled out of the ditch. Kuli Khan made desperate attempts to brush food and mud from my clothes. In an effort to retrieve my hat he stood upon it. This destroyed my usual sense of proportion. With the feelings of a savage at the Court of Queen Victoria, I followed George, who looked clean, cool and assured.

Ten minutes later we had been driven in considerable state to an admirable white building set most effectively in a garden, and placed at the end of a table loaded with

Group of pilgrims in the Hindu Kush on their way to Mazar-i-Sherif.

Photo, Capt. (

Transporting a yurt, the felt-covered hut of Turkoman nomads, on bullock-back.

Turkoman travellers at Dowshi, the first market in the Steppes, on their

The author with lorry marked in Afghan lettering, Kabul, and pheasant shot in the Hindu Kush.

Photo, Capt. Galloway.

ıl-i-Khumri, on the road to the Hindu Kush. ıe bridge is supposed to ıte from the time of exander of Macedon.

flowers and sweets. "Can't you do anything to save us?" I asked, but George ignored my plea, while he expressed the utmost appreciation of all that had occurred to us.

Beyond the walled garden orchards foamed with blossom. Further away, the sands swelled into hundreds of smooth, egg-shaped dunes, and beyond these again, the gold of the desert spread to the sheer red hills. It was a lovely view and I turned to it for relief from the food continuously pressed upon us. It was excellent food, but we had already over-eaten.

Course followed course. With the hospitality for which Afghanistan is famous, our hosts offered us not a choice, but an accumulation, of rich substances. I did my best and George surpassed anything that could be expected of a limited human capacity. He devoured plov. He absorbed tea. Hours later, when stiffened by repletion I staggered to my feet, he rose, a trifle damp perhaps, but otherwise unmoved, and, still making the correct remarks, moved with agility and suppleness towards the door I thought I should never reach.

Somehow we climbed into the lorry. George bowed from the waist. How he contrived that movement I cannot imagine.

Outside the garden, where orange lilies blazed, the road degenerated. At the first bump, I pleaded to be allowed to walk. "*Could* you?" asked George with an expression of awe.

In mid-desert we saw a deserted tomb. With one accord we urged the driver towards it. Kuli Khan protested in vain. The earth was flat, though hard. On it, in the shelter of a wall, we extended ourselves. Speechless, we considered our state.

Shadows lengthened. Camels with tufts of feathers standing up like brooms on the saddle pommels plodded past. Doubtless they averted their supercilious eyes. There were no foot-passengers. Every man rode, either upon the rump of a donkey or astride a small, shaggy horse. Russia had come to Afghanistan, for these Turkoman

riders wore knee-boots and immense fur hats. They were bundled in a multitude of wadded coats, with rifles slung across their shoulders.

In despair, Kuli Khan stood over us. He said, "If you would not spend the night in the desert, you must go—you will freeze, you will be eaten by wild beasts, you will be murdered——" He couldn't think of anything else equally improbable, so he stopped with his mouth still open.

"Oh, why did they get us out of that ditch?" I murmured.

"After all," said George, strictly reasonable, "it would probably annoy us if distinguished foreigners expected at the Guildhall insisted on picnicking in a drain somewhere in the Mile End Road."

CHAPTER XXIV

THE MECCA OF CENTRAL ASIA

In Mazar-i-Sherif there are supposed to be 6,000 houses. The old mud-built town gathers round the Hazrat Ali, a beautiful sea-blue mosque, exquisitely tiled, with every dome and minaret intact, where, according to erroneous legend, Ali, son-in-law of the Prophet Mohammed, is buried. The new town stretches splendidly between white Government buildings to gardens of apricot, cherry and pomegranate.

We arrived shortly after the Moslem New Year, a season of pilgrimage during which the vast court of the mosque is thronged with shiahs from all over Asia. Driving through the crowded bazaars, we saw Arabs and Chinese, Mongols, Persians, Pathans and Turkomans, Bedouin from the far South, gypsies, fakirs dressed in peacocks' feathers and innumerable exiles from the Soviet Central Asian republics who had crossed the Oxus in search of a market as much as a mosque.

The main square had become a fair surrounded by lanes of tea-booths. Acrobats gave performances to throngs of shepherds with the caraculi skins they hoped to sell still warm on their arms. Fighting partridges drew other crowds, whose leaders bet as much as a thousand Afghanis on the result of a five-hour conflict divided into ten-minute rounds. Cook-shops displayed solid walls of plates on whose metal surfaces the hungry beat a cheerful tattoo. Clumsy merry-go-rounds, worked by human power, swung seats shaped like boxes high into the air, where, as often as not, they upset their occupants on to the heads of the crowd below.

In the sunset we forced our way, slowly, with much

hooting, through an amazed and curious but not at all hostile throng. It was devoid of women. Where the bazaars ended we came to new public gardens and a sentry in front of the Governor's office indicated a long one-storeyed building with a veranda. There, he said, we could sleep and eat. It had baths and a cook. We could, in fact, ask no more.

The Government hotel-keeper was a tall and dignified personage with a lilac complexion and purple suiting. He spoke Pushtu as well as Persian and he began to be informative as soon as he had shown us into excellent rooms, each with a bath attached.

Thus we gained a considerable knowledge of conditions in Mazar, while we tried to secure some form of lighting. I wanted a bath, but there was as yet no plumbing. The tubs stood lone and magnificent in the middle of blue and yellow tiling. The hotel-keeper expressed doubt as to the amount of water available, but Kuli Khan fortunately decided that his dignity depended on our cleanliness. He turned into a whirlwind. With an amazing amount of noise and movement, he became the centre of an ever-growing crowd, all of whom contributed water in small receptacles. As a crowning miracle, he produced a lamp for each of us! Mine lit a minimum of space and left the remainder of the room in impenetrable shadow.

I turned up the wick. I washed. I reflected. I rewashed because I was really very dirty. Then I noticed that I was becoming blacker with every movement. The water itself was black and the lovely blue tiling feathered with what appeared to be soot. Blacks fell out of the air. It was snowing darkness.

I wouldn't have believed that one lamp could distribute so much smoke. Leaving grimy tracks behind me, I surged through the dimness to turn it down. But the harm was done. Everything grew blacker and blacker. The room resembled a London fog. When I escaped from it, I found George, several shades darker, expostulating with an impenitent Kuli Khan. The latter leaned

gently upon his backbone and mourned the general helplessness of man. Women didn't count.

Eventually we went to bed between grey sheets and rested our soiled faces upon greyer pillow-cases. We slept, of course, and in the morning life appeared no more than streaked. For there was all Mazar to explore and Kuli Khan had contrived a little clean water as well as a completely new mood. He was gentle and forlorn. He clung to the driver, who, in deference perhaps to the holiness of Mazar, had allowed his shirt to flow free between his regulation khaki coat and trousers. Together, they disappeared in the direction of the mosque. Their turbans were very elegant. Their hands were clasped. They walked slowly, as if to share with the crowd the precious gift of their suddenly conceived friendship.

At a respectful distance, George and I followed. The domes of the mosque were blue as sea-water. They were infinitely bluer than the sky. I never saw them rising above the trees and broken mud walls without that quickening of the pulses which is a tribute to beauty. For, to me, Mazar of the Sherif, two hundred years older than Samarkand and still perfect, is the loveliest group of buildings in Central Asia. It is untouched by modernity, or what we call progress.

Down a wide street bordered by mud houses, we approached the mosque. Dust padded the stones under our feet. The towers of a ruined medersa rose above acres of flat, white roof. The air itself was white, as if all the colour had been drawn out of it. But where the blind-walled houses ended twin minarets guarded the first gate of the shrine. In the early morning they were ice-blue, like glaciers in shadow. At noon, they acquired a ferocity of colour emphasized by contrast with the sun-bleached walls and roofs.

In an alcove beside the gate, a personage who might have come straight from the pages of a Persian missal sat among a host of shoes. He had a smooth oval face with a fruit-like ripeness about the skin. His hair was

black and delicate. Very brilliant were his clothes, into which he withdrew himself with the air of deprecating any human contact. The shoes which surrounded him were curved like the rinds of melons. Red, blue and yellow, they tilted their toes towards the still more brilliant mosaics of the arch. And the slight, smooth man who knew them all, as if they had names, told us, without a second glance, to go through the great gate, but to keep to the paved walk which ran round three sides of the court.

Of all holy cities I have visited, Mazar-i-Sherif was certainly the least fanatical. Nobody forbade our passage. Few of the worshippers showed interest in our presence, yet they could never have seen a woman and rarely a foreigner within the sacred enclosure.

At the moment of our entry the Imam, standing on the roof of the mosque, was crying the azzan. From every quarter of the town pilgrims hurried to the noon prayers. A cloud of white pigeons rose from the court. For a while they flew round the clustered domes, and I thought of sea-gulls reflected in blue water. Then they settled and a great stillness fell upon the crowd. It was as if a Persian carpet had been spread over the pavement. It stretched from the doors of the mosque to the low wall behind which we stood. The rich and complicated design was provided by the many-coloured clothes of the worshippers, who stood shoulder to shoulder without an inch of space between them. Behind them the domes were piled like bubbles. I imagined them swelling in the heat. Under four tall lances, an Imam recited the first verse of the Koran. "There is no God but God——" A wind passed over the Persian carpet. The turbaned heads bowed to the earth. Except for an old man stiffened by rheumatism, the pattern was again complete. Brown, green and crimson, striped, embroidered or quilted, the backs of the pilgrims covered the court. Only the cripple remained, half-upright, a hump upon the smoothness of the human prayer-rug.

CHAPTER XXV

GRAVE AND GAY IN MAZAR-I-SHERIF

MAZAR gave us some original moments. For we stayed a while at the hotel and fought a losing battle with the lamps that seemed to be quite capable of smoking in anticipation or retrospection of the brief periods when we were obliged to light them.

We made various friends with whom, in the evening, we used to sit in the tea-houses erected within sight of the mosque. George generally disposed himself on the edge of a hard wooden couch (a sandali) with his legs hanging down, but I had long ago acquired the habit of sitting on my feet, immobile among tea-pots and handleless cups.

As the sunset faded, rushlights and lanterns glimmered in the open-fronted booths and the light was reflected in the shining metal surfaces of the plates with which the cook-shops advertised their wares. In front of us the minarets were silhouetted against a pale sky, but the lanes and alleys which had grown up for the New Year fair faded into the background of fruit-trees.

With a soft and sibilant darkness gathered round us, we watched the crowd swelling towards the couches of the tea-khanés. A lute whispered in a garden. Shepherds with the odour of young animals and young grass clinging to their coats settled upon the neighbouring seats. They sighed and shuffled into comfortable positions. A boy, sophisticated by contrast, swung from his head a tray heaped with bread. The shepherds took the flat, hot sheets and rolled them between earth-stained fingers. A commotion shook the bosoms of their coats and the heads of newly born caraculi peered between the folds.

A few yards away stood an oven, shaped like an egg. It

offered a glowing core to a scene whose values were changing with the night. A baker, crouched upon the earth within the circle of light, slapped his dough flat upon the inner wall of the cone and whipped it out again with a movement that simultaneously shaped and placed it on a carpet-covered tray. Hairless boys bore these head-high between the couches, and the smell of the hot yeastless bread mingled with the smells of earth, oil, dung and strong human flesh.

A townsman seated himself beside us. He wore a European coat and the shepherds immediately made room for him. It occurred to me then that anybody wearing tweeds instead of quilted cotton must be assured of an honourable place in Mazar. For Afghanistan yearns after progress, and this strange state is visualised in terms of clothing rather than in the enfranchisement of women and in such simple matters as freedom of speech and political opinion.

The townsman said, "Have you eaten the air?" by which he meant, "Have you walked about the town?" and when we assured him that we had done nothing else for several hours, he added, "It is time then that you had bread," which is the familiar way of saying, "Let us dine."

Since no cook would make a satisfactory artistic plov under two hours, we denied ourselves the succulence of meat and rice most delicately spiced, and compromised by buying long spits of wood on which fantastic fragments sizzled. They were excellent but over-peppered, and we had to cool our throats with bowls of tea, while the townsman kept up a gentle monologue. "It is a pity that the lady goes north, beyond the bounds of civilisation. Here, in Afghanistan, there is freedom and plenty to eat. In Russia, you will starve if you do not go to prison." In his voice was the fear which I had heard in Kandahar, but directed against the Soviet instead of towards British Imperialism.

"Do many go north from here?" I asked through the medium of George, whose patience as an interpreter equalled that of his favourite philosopher.

"None who can avoid it," replied the Afghan. "Why

should they? The people here do not want to cross the Amu Darya, and the people on the other bank are not allowed to do so. There is some smuggling, of course. The boldest paddle themselves across on inflated goatskins. They make a raft of these and lie flat upon it with their legs in the water. They use their feet as a rudder and drift across stream on the currents."

After several bowls of tea, he acknowledged, "The big men in the caraculi trade have passports. They can cross when they like. Some of them have houses in Russia and it is said they are rich."

We asked about the division of land round Mazar and were told that grazing was apportioned in bulk to each district centring on a village. The tribes ranging the neighbourhood, Usbegs, Tadjiks, Turkomans and Afghans, divide it according to the size of their flocks, so that each nomad farmer knows how far his sheep may graze.

In England I had heard it said that the finest "tagher" (unborn lamb) skins were obtained by means of abortion. "Ask if they really give the wretched ewes saline draughts and then chase them round," I begged the acquiescent George, who, during the absence of Kuli Khan, had become my sole resource in a Tower of Babel.

Selecting what he thought might be the appropriate tongue, English officer addressed Afghan shepherd. The result was compounded of deep breathing and embarrassed grunts. The local townsman then repeated exactly the same words, similarly accented, and the nomad understood them. Surprised, he said that saline would certainly spoil the skin and they got such good prices for "tagher" that it was worth while killing the ewe.

At this moment, Kuli Khan and the driver passed, with their fingers still intertwined. They drifted rather than walked, and they looked indescribably remote, in spite of the exuberance of shirt which ballooned above reticent khaki trousers.

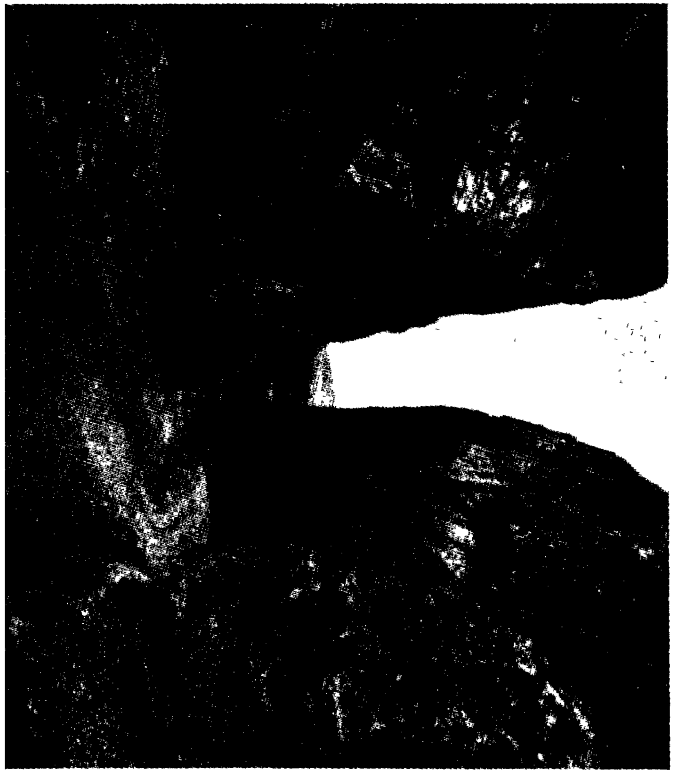
The townsman gazed at them with a strange mixture of feelings. They were modern and civilised, but they were

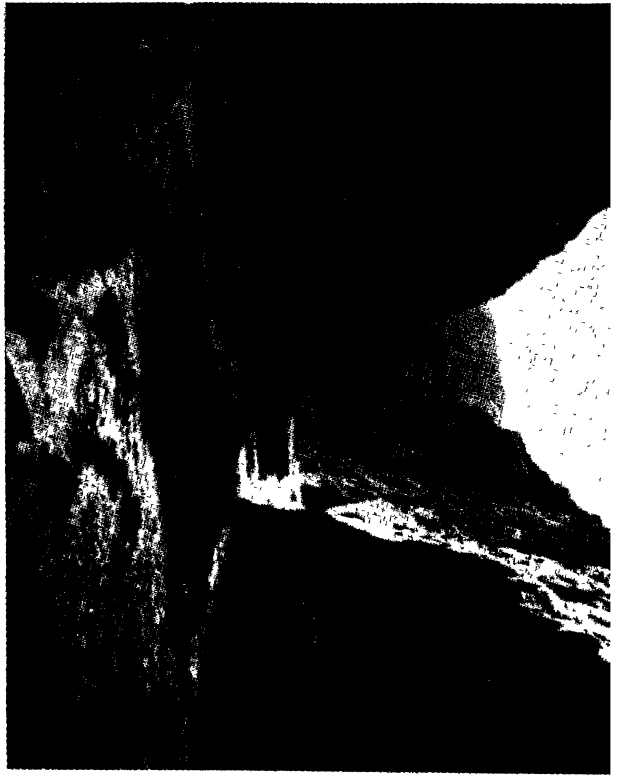
subjects of a foreign race. They had discarded the habitual hairiness of Islam, but they wore turbans. Readjusting his sheepskin hat, our friend, no doubt, wished it were a bowler.

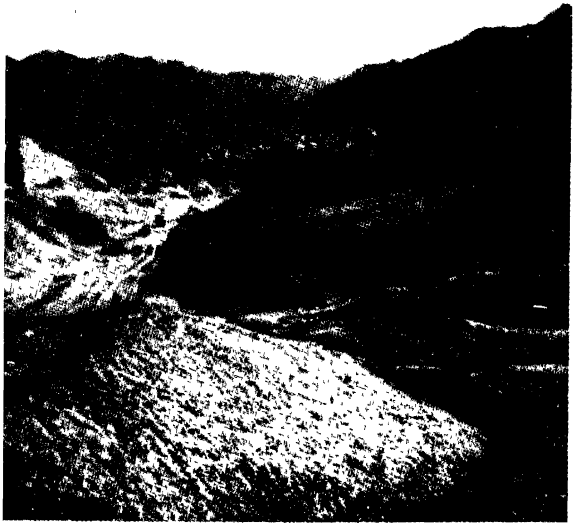
For a long time we sat in silence. A juggler threw himself into the air. In a high voice a man standing alone began to sing an old heroic story. Soon he was surrounded by a crowd who crouched down on their heels and remained apparently entranced. Without sound or movement they listened to the monotonous voice repeating a tale that they had heard from childhood. Somewhere, a player tuned his long-handled guitar.

George and I walked home. After we had extricated ourselves from the throngs which pressed about us, thrusting their faces close to ours in order to see more clearly the marvels of our shape and colouring, we turned into a bazaar that we did not know. The booths were closed. Pencils of light, escaping between cracks in the shutters, accentuated the general darkness. For the roofs reached together shutting out the sky.

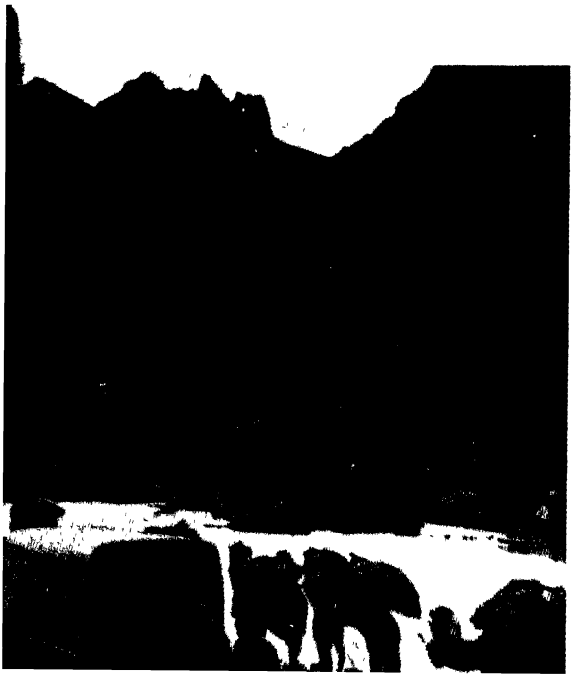
We stumbled over stones and heaps of rubbish. Dust silenced our footsteps. Soon we lost sense of direction. The bazaar ran out between high walls and a dog howled. Then we ceased to talk, for Mazar-i-Sherif became suddenly immense and secret. As in Jellalabad, I felt the presence of innumerable human beings without being able to see them. I heard movements and suppressed voices. It was as if the blind mud walls held back a tide which beat helpless against them. Unconsciously, we quickened our steps. "Uncomfortable," said George. "What?"







The "lunar" country; barren hills beyond the second range of the Hindu Kush.



In the Hindu Kush. Our lorry meets a camel caravan bound for Tashkent.

CHAPTER XXVI

"AND THEN THE POLICE ARRIVED"

ONE day, we went into the market to buy caraculi skins. The shops were selling them, half-cured and stiff as boards, for 40 to 100 Afghanis, according to the colour. Brown, shading lighter at the tips of the curls, was the favourite colour.

While George hesitated in front of a booth where a pale-faced Jewish middleman sat cross-legged beside a pile of sheepskin hats, a farmer sidled up to me. Swart and red, with flat cheekbones, and coats that served as a wardrobe for all his worldly possessions, he pulled a raw fleece from his sleeve and offered it for 20 Afghanis.

As soon as we began to bargain, a crowd gathered. Kuli Khan, definitely ashamed of us, stood apart, twirling a flower. He held it to his nose so that he should not be disturbed by the smell of sweat and hides. But the farmers were enjoying themselves. News soon spread that there were foreigners buying caraculi, and from every side sunburned men, voluminously clothed, appeared with skins that were still soft and bleeding. These they thrust into our faces or draped insidiously about our persons until we felt like butchers, but it was great fun. The lust of bargaining possessed us. We spent all our own money and borrowed from Kuli Khan, whose distaste held him fascinated on the outskirts of the throng.

Prices dropped as more and more sellers appeared. Soon we were offering ten, seven, and even five Afghanis for well-marked skins, and the crowd, entering into the spirit of the game, pushed us from hand to hand, tried to dispose of the same skins twice, offered us all sorts of oddments, patted us, fingered us, discussed, criticised and questioned us.

"We've got enough for a coat," I shouted to George, and he retorted, "I can't stop—they'll be giving us the skins soon."

And then the police arrived. Imagining that we needed rescue, they forced a way into the crowd, closed round us, and in spite of expostulations on our part and violent recriminations from those shepherds who still had skins to sell, they removed us, followed by a flattered Kuli Khan.

George had to retrieve hat, speech and ideas before he could convince the amiable and competent police-officer that we had been in no danger and that he had interfered with local trade, but Kuli Khan, laden with skins, interrupted, "There are enough here for a carpet, and we shall have to buy salt to cure them. How can we do this on our way back across the great mountains, for the lady cannot take these into——" He nodded towards the mysterious frontier beyond which, to the Afghans, is chaos.

The police offered advice. Clearing a space in the dust, we laid out our skins and compared them. They were well matched. Kuli Khan deigned to smile. "There is sufficient mutton for your dinner still attached to them," he said. We told him to buy salt and he drifted away with an admiring farmer as guide. We thanked our rescuers, regretted the trouble to which they had been put, and in high spirits went to have a last look at the fair.

Here again we contrived to get into difficulties. It happened that several owners of fighting partridges were wandering about, holding up bell-shaped cages with bars of cane, but nobody seemed anxious to involve his particular bird in a battle.

The crowd explained. A trained chikar may be worth 1,000 Afghanis, as much as a caraculi ram. The owner of such a bird will not risk him unless he knows victory is assured.

"How on earth do they ever get up a fight, then?" we asked simultaneously.

The crowd shrugged shoulders, pressed closer round

us and shouted, at first sarcastically and then with anger, to the carriers of the hooded cages, who tried to slip away and were forced back again by the pressure of determined bodies.

Elated, we found ourselves the leaders of the faction which demanded a fight. "Offer a prize?" I suggested.

"Have you any money?" asked George, with a last impulse of caution.

"No. Have you?"

We searched in odd pockets, found a few coins and magnificently offered them as an incentive to battle. But the crowd wasn't troubling about money. Ten deep and twenty deep, they made a ring, and pushed the most likely chikar owners into the centre. George and I found ourselves squatting in the dust among a mass of hard-breathing and strong-smelling nomads intent on getting the maximum of excitement out of the pending fight.

Amidst a turmoil of advice, shouted at top voice, two men crouched on their haunches, each with a cage in front of him. The covers were removed and for a moment the fat, brown birds with striped wings raged behind the bars. Then they were freed, to start with chuckles and squawks of fury what might have been a bout of all-in wrestling. For the champions did little pecking. Occasionally one would try for a master-hold upon the neck of the other, but, for the most part, they strove with feet apart and beaks interlocked, steadying themselves with their wings. When one felt his balance going, he would break away, flutter in a circle and return to the conflict.

"Which will win?" we asked, leaning upon the nearest shoulders.

"It is very even," gasped a shepherd, "but my money is on the smaller. He is better trained and he has courage—

ıile we watched the birds scuffling in a fog of dust, we learned how they are caught as fledgelings and tamed by being carried always in the hand. Afterwards they are let loose in the village fields and made to run for grain. They

have sparring-partners and are taught to fight as chickens. Their wings are never cut and they are exercised every day. A good cock may remain fit for seven years, during which he will have dozens of battles lasting several hours in ten-minute rounds, but his owner will never let him be hurt if he can help it. A chikar which loses an eye is useless for further contests.

When a bird flies away, refusing to fight any longer, or takes refuge among its master's clothing, victory is awarded to the other, but if a man sees his chikar in danger he claps over it the bell-shaped cage-top and a furious argument ensues.

During one of these, a youth fell out of a tree on to a personage of some importance who had stationed himself beside us. For a moment, we visualised ourselves as the focusing point of a riot, but, with considerable presence of mind, a farmer let loose a third partridge, and, in the scrimmage which followed, personal feelings were forgotten.

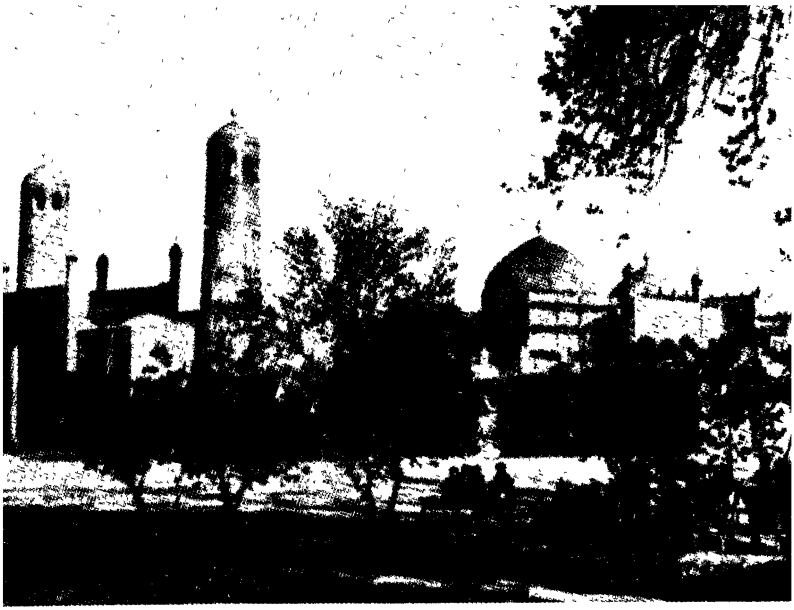
By this time the crowd had trebled. I could see nothing but a mass of turbans and bent shoulders. The trees were laden with spectators who leaned recklessly from the branches to shout comments, encouragement and criticism.

Our partridge won. Caked with dust, we struggled out of the crowd.

"Whew!" said George. "That was hot!" And he took off his coat.

Presumably, the nomads of the Steppes had never before seen a primrose-coloured sweater. Ecstatic, they pressed upon us. George added to their interest by peeling off the jersey, preparatory, no doubt, to replacing his coat. But this he was never able to do. For, with a roar of delight, the throng heaped itself upon us. "A juggler!" they cried, and from all over the square more and more colourful figures came running to see this delicious and entirely original spectacle.

"You'll have to do something——" I said to a



A side view of the Hazrat Ali.

Ali's mosque, taken from inside the court.

The main gate of the Hazrat Ali.

distracted George. "You can't disappoint them——" After that, speech became impossible.

Once again we were rescued by the police, and this time they hung about us, effective and still amiable, chasing away small boys who longed for a performance and dervishes with feathers in their matted hair who disapproved on principle of anything they didn't understand. We were allowed to drink tea at our usual booth, but in splendid isolation. Then we were sent home like children with the assurance that our friend had bought us much salt and the implication that we had business which should not be neglected.

At the hotel, we found Kuli Khan had given up the unequal struggle with "lamps that made dark." In gloom and a disquieting odour he was seated on the floor, surrounded by caraculi skins.

George wasted no words. He went to find a torch, and we knew quite well that he would get the Governor's if necessary.

Kuli Khan continued to scatter salt. His movements were soft and vague. Suddenly he leaned towards me and asked, "Has the lady got her eyes shut?" He was always most impressive when he used the third person.

While I stared at the place where I supposed him to be, his voice, close beside my ear, whispered, "It is better to keep the eyes tight closed in the dark—for fear of things that bite!"

George's footsteps sounded, reassuringly solid, in the corridor. Light wavered in front of him. Kuli Khan upset a strong-smelling powder over my skirt. I had no time to ask if he meant "for fear of" bugs or ghosts!

CHAPTER XXVII

BALKH OF THE "SILK ROAD"

IN the days of Alexander, in the later days of the Mongol conquerors, Balkh was a capital city and a great market on the "Silk Road" from China to the West. Her ramparts delayed the Macedonian advance. The Bala Hissar fort must have looked down from its proud eminence on battles that altered the fate of Asia. To-day, fragments of the mighty walls wander indeterminately into the fields, and the fortress is a crater surrounded by heaps of rubble that were once bastions. The effect is of a gaping jaw, with broken molars sticking out of the bone.

George and I climbed to the highest point and looked across the plain, faintly flushed with green. An immensity of wall dropped from our feet to the irregular cultivation confused with the beginning and end of villages. The view was without consequence or pattern. It was difficult to imagine a grave and independent city, proud of her position on the most famous caravan route of the known world.

Among newly-turned earth, indicating the plans for a public garden, stood all that was left of an eleventh century mosque. One of the great gates still stood, facing the wind and the bitter plain. Of the mosque itself, there remained only the pumpkin dome on the verge of crumbling and the four walls that supported it, with an arch at the front. Most of the tiling had disappeared. A few fragments of blue clung to the least exposed surface, but the accumulated dust of years, that generic dust which is the keynote of Central Asia, had silted over the building, reducing its colours to those of the surrounding mud. Of the earlier Balkh, centre of Zoroastrianism, there is no

trace beyond the fortress and the crumbling walls. Within these, Zoroaster preached the purification of the world, to a people who were to become in turn Buddhists and Moslems. His followers, centred now on Yezd, that strange city of the Wind-Towers in the Persian desert, took fire for their symbol. As a Cross to the Christians and a Crescent to the Moslems, flame has become the sign of a three-thousand-year-old religion whose litanies are chanted in a dead language (Zend), but the Zoroastrians are not and were never fire-worshippers. They believe in one God, called Ormuzd, and in an Evil Spirit, Ahriman, between which principles of good and evil there is eternal war. Man can enlist on either side he chooses and according to his deserts he reaches heaven or hell, but these are states or conditions of thought rather than places, and there is no reincarnation of the body.

Through the long and dusty lane that constitutes the high street of Balkh, we asked if any Zoroastrians remained, but elderly Moslems and young men who would have been free-thinkers had they been able to organise their thoughts at all, did not recognise the name. They asked if it referred to politics or a disease.

We went further into the bazaars that tunnelled after the manner of Central Asia between houses, underneath them, and indeed through the very centre of houses, so that the life of the village seemed to be split by the driving force of its commerce. The bazaars were roofed and should have been dark, but a dusty sunlight filtered between the beams, so that the crude colours of cotton stuffs, silks and hides or furs were mellowed by a golden pollen.

A delicious group were drinking tea at the entrance to the market. One man sat cross-legged upon a wooden couch. He wore a brilliantly-flowered chapan and had buried his face in a cup. Another, booted to the knees, sat on one leg and dangled the other over the edge of the sandali. His face, round and smiling, was trimmed with tufts of hair. He looked as if he enjoyed life in general and us in particular. Behind him, a boy in Joseph's coating

held a tray piled with bread and glutinous scarlet sweetmeats. About the other customers who meditated over empty cups, there was an air of long-established patience. One of them disengaged his legs from a cramped position, straightened them, and came over to us. "Did your honours happen to observe," he asked with extreme courtesy, "another lorry on the road? Was there any such vehicle behind you, or one perchance upset, or in other trouble on the way?" We regretted that we had passed nothing on wheels and the man went back to the tea-house to wait for friends who might arrive to-day, to-morrow or a week hence.

We also drank tea and watched the street wherein all movement was retarded and silenced by an accumulation of dust. It was as if we looked back into the past, a long way.

Above the flat roofs of the village we could see the aching blue of mosaics fast disappearing, and on the other side the tumbled walls that had guarded the Balkh of Zoroaster. In front of us a ghostly traffic passed without sound. I remember a brougham, so small and delicate, painted with garlands of flowers and fishes. Behind it came a phaeton that looked as if it had been resurrected piecemeal from a tomb. Bundles of men rode on small donkeys. I remember them as clustering close together like a swarm of bees, their legs hanging, their hands clinging to the nearest wadded coat. The donkeys were no more than footstools. I saw them sagging into the dust beneath a weight of over-clothed humanity. And there was even a droshki, as one sees them in pictures of old Russia. A bell hung from the high arched yoke, but it had no clapper. The horse was white and thin. At every pace, it sank closer to the earth.

A beggar, with a sheepskin round his naked limbs, held out a bowl. It was empty and his eyes also were empty. He did not speak, nor did he thank us when we gave him money. "I believe he's dead," said George, shivering. "Damn cold," he added. "We'd better get a move on."

"I believe they're all dead," I retorted.

At the end of the lane, the lorry waited. Bucketing over the heaps and holes that went by name of a road, it soon shook us back into the twentieth century. But we remained forlorn. To-morrow, I would go on alone, across the Northern desert to the Oxus or Amu Darya. George would return to Kabul. Russia and Afghanistan refused access to their frontier. There was no means of circumventing the official ukase. What I did alone was another matter. But two had been good company.

CHAPTER XXVIII

ACROSS THE AFGHAN DESERT

MAZAR-I-SHERIF, muted in the dusk, but it was that dusk which streams like smoke before the dawn. A last struggle with the lamp which imitated Vesuvius and had by this time made blackamoors of us all. A last attempt to clean up in the beautiful blue bathroom, the tub now caked with soot, the plaster flaked with it, black streams pouring over the floor. A sombre breakfast, George speechless and the elegant Kuli Khan disturbed because something had gone wrong with the primus, or he had been too emotional with the eggs. A very small saloon full of guide and chauffeur. Other figures drifting into the picture with bills or advice. So I left the surprising city with her gardens of fruit-blossom and her sea-blue mosque, her insistence on the twentieth century, and her unconscious reliance on the eighth.

In ten minutes the Mecca of Central Asia had become a vague oasis in the past and that past was already smothered in dust.

It has been my good fortune to cross a number of deserts and I have often argued that the monotony of the landscape transmutes opinions—any opinions—into the most surprising convictions, but this last strip of Afghanistan, sunk in sand, colourless except where gypsum or salt threw off a faint blue fluorescence, convinced me of nothing but my own inconsequence. Pillars of sand whirled out of the earth and sped to meet us, raging and inept. If they broke within range, a hail of extraneous matter fell upon the roof. The small saloon shook. The chauffeur doubled himself upon the wheel

as if he wrestled with it, and the guide, who talked to me continuously under the impression that if he uttered enough words I must surely understand some of them, draped himself in a shawl and the glory of his moustaches.

At one time the desert erupted into mounds, snow-white and glittering with what I took to be salt. At another a village appeared, its towers and walls curiously flattened so that it seemed to be splayed upon the sands and half hidden in the clouds of matter which silted against it and lay heavily on the roofs. I've never seen a desert so full of substance, or perhaps the wind had come from far away and brought a lot of luggage with it.

"How far is it to Askar Khana?" I contrived to ask.

"Two hours' drive," gestured the guide. It was always two hours. However fast, however slow we went, it must be two hours. There was a relentless inevitability about that fact and eventually I found myself accepting it. In two hours, whether we moved, or stuck in a sand-drift, we should arrive at the last fort, a great mud-built square, with a watchtower on which no doubt a figure would be silhouetted with the sun gleaming upon a rifle barrel. I'd seen the whole thing long before it happened and by the time we did arrive there was such divergence between our watches that I never knew if it had taken two hours or four.

Under the walls, towering as I had imagined them, out of unlimited sand into unlimited emptiness, was a rickety wooden cart with a hood which provided diversion for the wind. The cart was drawn by two white horses. Bales of hay occupied the total floor space and much of the seat. A sergeant and three mounted troopers waited in the shelter of the nearest wall. It seemed to me then that for a considerable space of time, we did nothing at all. The Afghans did it with the facility and grace of practice for, like all Asians, they can do nothing in postures suggestive of action so easily as on their backs. I did it with mounting impatience, for I still had visions of a ferry running more or less to time.

At last, the guide and I were thrust on top of the bales of hay intended to nourish the fine white horses and after much hand-shaking we started. Behind us for a moment, there was the fort, imposingly solid amidst the turmoil of wind and sand. Then we were among the dunes, muffled in a curious silence, without perspective or horizon. The driver waded beside his horses, ankle-deep in sand. The cart creaked and rocked, but the sounds emitted by the straining axles seemed to come from far away.

For an immeasurable period, I remained balanced against the shoulders of the guide—they were comfortably rounded—while we ploughed through valleys and over ridges of a yielding softness. The wind had obliterated the track, but one of the troopers ambled ahead. He never changed his pace, so that, for hours, under the arch of the cape-hood, I saw the round quarters of a horse, gleaming with sweat, a khaki back, the slant of a rifle barrel and a chestnut tail. I saw nothing else except the sweeping curves of the dunes and they were all alike.

There came, of course, the inevitable moment when we stuck. The light cart heeled over. With the guide and the hay I slipped gently on to the sand. Everything about the affair was gentle. One horse fell and lay still. The other stood without comment. After a while the troopers decided to pick up the cart, but first they kindly extricated me from the bale which had burst.

Unfortunately, a good deal of the cart had also burst. The guide who looked rather like a well-fried fish, for much sand adhered to his natural grease, pointed out that the wheels had never been reliable.

We sat down to discuss the matter. We got up again and from the top of a dune scanned the desert for signs of a caravan. There were none.

Eventually, we offered the horses as much hay as they wanted and mounted upon them, bareback, with our legs dangling and the harness draped

One trooper carried my bedding, another my despatch case and a parcel of food. Thus, with the driver, still cheerful, labouring alongside, picking up all the odd things that fell from us, we came to Patta Kesar which I had imagined would be a fortress guarding the Oxus. It resolved itself instead into five straw yurts. They had been so blown about by the wind that they looked like scraps of matting untidily heaped by the river. From them came half a dozen soldiers, limp from the midday sleep. Their surprise took the form of stupefaction and they had no views as to how or where we should proceed. As my companions showed every sign of going to sleep at once and for a long time, I ambled off along the river bank, eastwards in the direction of the ford or the ferry, both of which I was now disposed to regard as legendary.

For the Oxus, frontier of Tartar and Mongol, barrier between the Soviet Socialist Republics and the Islamic stronghold of Afghanistan, was empty as the desert on its southern bank. Broad and swift sped the great river which rises in the Chinese mountains and after 900 miles flows into the Sea of Aral. Across it were green marshes and in the far distance a snow-capped range, but, at that moment, it seemed unlikely I should ever get any nearer to the plains where Sohrab and Rustum fought for the lordship of Central Asia.

Struggling along the bank with the guide rolling sleepily behind me and a trooper or two splayed in the rear with my luggage, I could see the red roofs of Termez and I wondered why corrugated iron should be symbolic of civilisation. Could anything be uglier than corrugated iron, or indeed than civilisation—hoardings, scrap-iron, signposts, Belisha beacons and ants all dressed differently —but could anything be more convenient or comfortable than civilisation? I put the last question as we reached Khema Kesar—a few more yurts, a trifle less collapsed and embedded as it were in stacks of petrol cases, bales of cotton pods, and bar metal. All this raw material had been imported from Termez, but it had waited so long for camel

transport to Mazar that it looked as if it had settled down for life. A few of the sacks had burst. Cotton dribbled on to the sand.

I've rarely seen anything so static as Khema Kesar. It could not even be surprised.

From one of the huts came a customs officer, warmly bearded, with a perfection of manner only found among the breed of Hatim Tai, symbol of hospitality, who would have "cut up his body to feed a guest" and who for that purpose did, in fact, kill his last camel and with it his hope of survival in the desert.

In this case such sacrifice was unnecessary for Kuli Khan had provided me with cold chicken and durably boiled eggs, adding all that he could purloin—doubtless with the owner's connivance—from George's well-selected store. But in the least ramshackle hut the modern Hatim made up his own camp-bed and laid on it a beautiful flowered quilt and a sheet of fine muslin. "For," said he most reasonably, "if no boat comes to-day, you will need rest before to-morrow, or the days after that."

In excessive heat, I dozed—with my feet well over the edge so as not to spoil the elegant bedding. In even greater heat, I got up and looked at the river. A wide-sailed kayuk fled down-stream. It was manned by Turkomans in vast sheepskin hats. I could see the crew's teapots in neat rows along the gunwale. But before I could do anything about it, the boat had gone—and in the opposite direction to Termez.

I went back to the camp-bed and battled with a host of flies who fancied my nose more delectable than it is generally supposed to be.

Much later it seemed to me, the modern Hatim arrived with coughing and green tea. Something about him indicated the arrival of a boat. In a flood of languages—different ones, of course—we hastened to the bank and there, under a leaning tower of petrol cases, lay a Russian barge, unpainted, decidedly raffish with the sickle and

at her mast

Two Afghan soldiers watched her unloading. They looked smart and businesslike beside the porters, one as white and juicy as a peach, the other a half-black, who struggled up a plank, their shoulders bent under the petrol tins.

The captain worked without speech and with a paucity of movement that I found admirable. As an automaton he swung each case into the correct position on the back bent before him and turned to the next. Fascinated—and dripping—I watched the tower dwindle.

Beside me, on the bank, Hatim offered comment on civilisation as it appeared to him. "Look at those men. They work like camels and are ordered about like donkeys." Laziness seeped from his every limb. When he stretched his arms it was as if he lifted them from a pool of idleness. I could imagine the ease and comfort of it dripping from him. Nobody in the West can savour to the full the rich content of idleness. As best I might, with the few words at my disposal, I framed a question—what did he think went on across the river. "Men starved," explained Hatim, "and there was nobody to give them bread." That seemed to him particularly puzzling for, in his own land, whatever the difficulties of life, there was always charity in the name of Allah. "But they are without religion," he mused, gazing across the Amu Darya. He might as well have said they were without water.

The captain of the barge looked at my passport and I felt the first quiver of a fear that was to become habitual. At the moment it was premature and followed by a more logical impatience, as the young man who might have been a Norwegian with his shock of fair hair growing all ways at once and his rust-red face, peered at every visa in turn. He held several upside down, moistening his lips and waving his head slowly like a bull shaking off flies.

At last, even Hatim, whom I suspected of being able to waste time as lavishly as his ancient prototype wasted his substance, protested in a flood of words. They had no

effect on the captain. He continued to stare at the Persian lions, in bright green.

Long ago, the desire for action had left me, but careless movement sent the bank on which we were standing, crumbling into the river. The barge offered an alternative to the water, and into it I rolled. The Afghans took advantage of the slight confusion following this unusual method of embarking to drop my luggage on top of me.

The captain looked doubtful, but he returned my passport. The engine spluttered and my spirits rose. It seemed that I should, at least, get across to the other side. On the shore, as we wore away, stood Hatim and the guide. Both continued to bow with suppleness and dignity. From the lips of both issued a stream of courteous blessings.

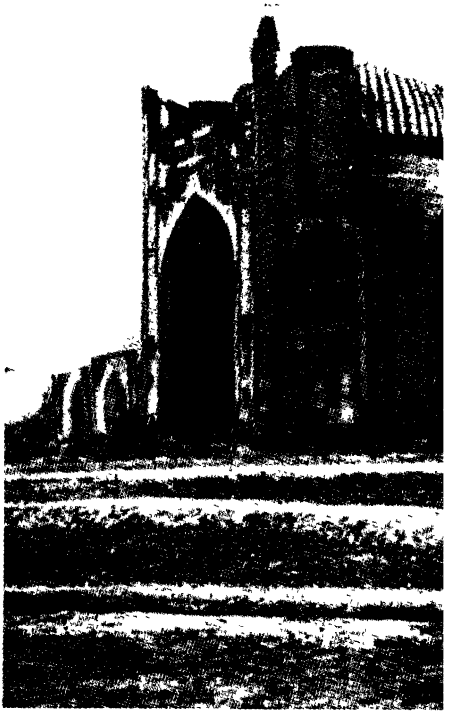
"Thank you, thank you——" I called, feeling that I was at this very moment being divorced from manners.

"The thankfulness will be ours when we see you return to the security and enlightenment of Afghanistan," retorted Hatim, using three different sets of words in his determination that I should understand.

For some time I sat on the blistering boards with my feet hanging into the well. The wind had dropped. An immensity of water glared under the afternoon sun. We were going downstream to avoid a spit piled in the middle of the river. Suddenly the captain leaned from the bridge and in German suggested that the cabin would be a preferable alternative to sunstroke.

Gratefully, I blundered into a hole with four wooden shelves on which lay oddments of clothing and the remains of a meal. My entry disturbed a mass of flies, but I was too hot and sleepy to bother about them. Shortly after I'd extended myself upon a shelf which smelt of many things, human, animal and unclassifiable, the half-black entered. Sweat made his skin look grey and his mouth hung slightly open. When he'd peeled off his shirt and kicked the broken shoes from his feet, he dropped upon the least

All that is left of Moslem Balkh: the ramparts attacked by Alexander are in ruins.

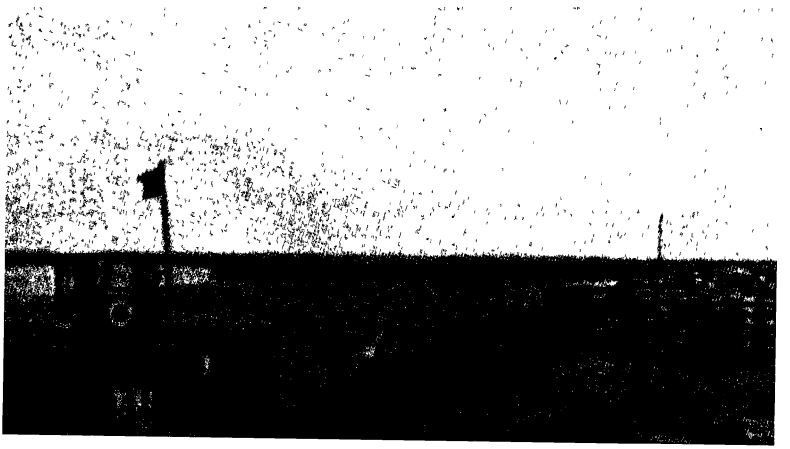


Below, a typical group of Turkoman shepherds at a tea-house in Balkh.

of Afghan troopers crossing the northern Afghan desert, a sea of sand between Mazar and Oxus.

forbidden frontier" of Russian Central Asia and Afghanistan. A Russian petrol barge unloac into the Afghan desert at Khema Kesar.

Photos, F



cumbered shelf and lay there panting. I think he slept, but his eyes remained wide open and their full, fixed stare added to the oddness of the situation.

When the barge turned against the current and the lurching set pannikins and teapots rolling on to a bundle of distressed underwear, I went on deck in the hopes of talking to the captain. He invited me to sit on the erection that did duty for a bridge.

By that time we were nearing the north bank, which seemed to me to be littered with the sinews of civilisation; wire, rails, machinery, especially American cotton-pickers looking not unlike fire engines, bales of raw material, timber, petrol cases, and the skeletons of boats growing on the slips. In the distance were two wireless stations and the long slabs of warehouses and offices that constitute the port of Termez.

The captain sat beside me on a backless bench. He had no expression and, except when he was lighting a cigarette, his hands hung heavy at his sides. He showed no curiosity as to the reason for my presence, but told me I was the first foreigner he'd seen on the river. He expressed an unimaginative contempt for Afghanistan and its people. "They have no schools, no clubs, no factories," he said. "The women are kept caged like wild beasts." I imagined his mind cluttered by the old-fashioned furniture of his thoughts. "The people are starving. There is nobody to give them food——"

I started and blinked. "Er! What did you say?"

The young man, who had perhaps never been just carelessly and happily young, repeated the words of Hatim, but in inverse sense.

"That is exactly what the Afghans say about Russia," I protested.

The captain did not move or smile. Very slowly he said, "It is the English who have misled them." After a perceptible pause, he added, "In Termez, you will see, there is plenty. It is not like the desert over there." He made no gesture towards the southern bank. He didn't even

look at it. To conclude the conversation, he spat within range of our feet.

Later, he asked if I'd like some tea. I accepted with enthusiasm and, after a lengthy exchange, the juicy white rolled up the ladder with glasses obviously unwashed. The captain produced a teapot much as a conjurer induces a rabbit out of a top-hat. Having upset a good deal of the liquid over my skirt, without apology or comment, he gave me a fair half of what remained. In silence we drank. In silence I considered the taste.

CHAPTER XXIX

RIVER PORT OF TADJIKISTAN

TERMEZ is one of those scrag-ends of earth and building material that are left lying about in the hot lands without apparent purpose. It is, of course, a river port, but with the exception of our barge, I saw no ships. The stacks and bales of raw material, presumably waiting for export, served as playground for thin, pale little boys and girls, in sailor-suits or overalls. They were entirely European, those children, and they reminded me that Afghan children grow up before they have time to play. At one moment they are sitting solemnly in the mud, regarding the universe, and the next they have become shopkeepers in their father's absence and are arranged cross-legged on the shelves of a bazaar, staring at or beyond the crowd with the same immobility of eye and lid.

The captain took leave of me with indifference. "It may be that they will not let you land. Then you can sleep on board and I will take you back to-morrow," with which comforting suggestion he made off in the direction of the reddest corrugated roofs.

I remained standing upon the quay, with a roll of bedding, a cardboard box and a despatch case at my feet, while a number of uniformed figures materialised from what had seemed a deserted quay. One of them took my passport. Another pointed out that if I sat in the lee of some bales, I should be in the shade. The rest did nothing. They didn't even talk among themselves. When asked any questions, they replied that there was a motor and it would come.

The afternoon sun sank. Gloomily I sat upon the ground and ate a hard-boiled egg. There was nothing

else to do. Reflecting that the man who tried to hurry the East had an easy job compared to him who would expedite the official processes of Russian Central Asia, I prepared to spend the night leaning against a cotton bale on the banks of the Oxus. Whenever I tried to move, a green or a blue uniform surged out of the conglomeration of raw material, half of it rotted by age, and made signs to me to sit down again. Eventually, of course, I lost the patience which had hung about me, heavy as a cloak. I visualised myself passportless in Tadjikistan, with no knowledge of the local language and very little of Russian. So, in spite of blue uniforms and green, I set out to look for the document which had been taken from me. Pursued by expostulating officials who had so short a time ago been peasants, sufficiently suppressed perhaps to make them uncertain as yet with regard to their authority, I searched every hut and shed within sight. In the end I found my passport on a table heaped with trousers, a primus and some tomatoes wrapped in a newspaper. When I took it away, nobody objected. They still said the motor would come.

I must have been half asleep among the bales when a dapper and suitably-tweeded personage who spoke a good many words that I could understand, arrived in a Ford. Into this an extraordinary number of human beings piled themselves and we rattled, with intervals of doors bursting open and the engine stopping, along a dusty, white road, unmetalled, towards the township of Termez, which lies a few miles inland from the river.

It was now evening and the streets were full of people. Every race seemed to be represented, every colour and every type. There were dark skins from Southern Asia, bearded men who should have worn turbans instead of the skull-cap which turned their heads into eggs, Mongols with slit eyes and no cheek-bones, Tartars of preposterous girth, but infiltrating the crowd was the new, symbolic (I had almost said synthetic) worker in his stained blouse, belted at the waist, buttonless, or with a zipp fastener at the throat. This man, whether Russian, Usbeg or Tadjik,

appeared to me to be always young and highly strung, pale as if he spent too many hours indoors, or as if the sun had no power over his mind-ruled body. He was apt to slouch a trifle, with hands in pockets and untidy hair, but he looked less fluid than the rest of the people swelling between the one storeyed houses, with colour in their shawls, or kerchiefs, or embroidered headgear. I wondered if even the persecution mania, to which most Bolshevics are honest victims, can standardise the innumerable races that go to the making of Russia. Still in Termez, scrag-end of the Soviet system, the workers in their blouses were the crust on the top of the pie and that pie contained the fruits of religion, of nationalism, of persecutions such as even Bolshevism has not dreamed, of the nomad life which existed here on the shores of the Amu Darya, Mother of rivers, before Genghiz Khan came from China or Alexander from Greece to the rape of Persia and India.

The motor stopped before a building from which the plaster peeled. It bore, surprisingly enough, the first flag and the first portrait of Stalin that I had seen. Into a comfortless office we all trooped, and there, with the utmost amicability, what appeared to be an entirely haphazard crowd fell upon my three pieces of luggage. They went through the bedding as if it had been a bundle of documents in code. Each cotton sheet, each second-hand blanket was examined foot by foot, shaken, discussed, and folded with meticulous care before being replaced. The iron ration of food in the cardboard box provoked little interest, but the contents of my despatch case, two shirts, two pairs of graceless stockings already mended, shoes, pyjamas, books, toothbrush, comb, were ranged upon a desk while at least half a dozen people picked them up and set them down, always with that air of fingering something breakable.

"What are they looking for?" I asked the man in tweeds.

"I don't know," he said with a charming smile and offered me a cigarette.

"Ask them," I begged.

"They wouldn't know," he replied, "but they must look."

The inspection which from beginning to end was conducted with tender care for my belongings and the most deprecatory politeness towards myself, lasted for over an hour. During the course of it, children had wandered in and been fed on chocolate, women with fringed kerchiefs on their heads had come in search of their men, possibly with the information that the evening meal was ready. One of them with a big, red face, creased about the lips and full of dimples, put her finger into the toothpaste that an official was reflectively squeezing on to a sheet of paper and subsequently tasted it. She was immediately smacked good and hard, while blue uniforms, green and grey tried to replace the toothpaste in its tube.

When the luggage had been locked or restrapped, a charming young man, with lint white hair and sensitive lips, thrust his cap on to the back of his head and prepared to deal with the first foreign passport he had seen. In it, he found much that was as interesting as it was incomprehensible and some fifteen minutes elapsed before he could tear himself away from the fascinating description of the British Foreign Minister, the splendours of the Iraq visa, or the delicacy of the green ink in which I was made free of the world. He rubbed his finger on the latter to see if it would come off.

"What are you?" he asked at last.

"A tourist," I replied with the utmost firmness.

"But you cannot be a tourist. You have only got a transit visa."

Here, of course, was the obstacle of which I'd always been conscious. "I'm going to Moscow," I said, feeling that I must nicely adjust my manner between confidence and that gentle imbecility which always appeals to officials.

"If she is going to Moscow, she is certainly a tourist," suggested the man in tweeds and gave me another cigarette.

"Are you in business?"

"She is not in business and she cannot be an official. Perhaps she is an invalid. Are you sick?"

"No."

The young man felt it was all very difficult. "Why are you going to Moscow?"

"I want to see the Kremlin and Lenin's tomb."

"There!" interpolated my tweeded friend. "If she wants to see Lenin, she must be a tourist."

The official pushed his cap still further back and re-read the visa which gave me right of transit through the Asian Soviet republics, with two months in Moscow at the end of what should have been an eight days' journey.

The argument continued. We all drank tea. On the desk my handbag lay innocently open. Under the handkerchief which bulged out of it, was a small, discreet and extremely effective camera. I hoped it wouldn't be found. The films were disposed about my person with the result that I moved somewhat stiffly, none of my garments having sufficient normal receptacles for the sharp-edged rolls with which they were at the moment stuffed.

A woman more persistent than the rest, thrust herself behind the table and poured a flood of Usbeg into the ears of the passport officer.

"She has a baby. No, she will has——" explained one of the largest men I've ever seen, in surprising English.

"Not immediately," I exclaimed, with a horrified glance at the lady's figure.

"Yes, he must go. His brother have the baby——"

I longed to elucidate the problem, but at this moment everybody became suddenly weary. "Write," they said to the officer. "Write something on her passport."

A small boy opened the door with much noise, put in his head and yelled. I could only distinguish the word "plov."

"What shall I write?" asked the harassed officer. "If she is not a tourist, what is she?"

"Of course she is a tourist," insisted a dozen voices, and so the magic word was written in minute characters at the top of my passport where it did much to counteract the difficulties represented by the seven letters of TRANSIT.

CHAPTER XXX

INTRODUCTION TO A TRAIN

THE day had been unending. In darkness and in Mazar-i-Sherif I had eaten what turned out to be my last orderly meal for weeks. In darkness and in Termez I sought, still in the company of the man in tweeds, a place where I could rest until, towards midnight, a train on which everyone agreed there would probably be no seats, left for Bokhara.

Between rows of thin trees, fledged with exhausted leaves, we drove and drove until we arrived at a two-storeyed white house that might have belonged to any French outpost. It had the windowless walls habitual to North Africa and rather more paint than its neighbours. In it, half a dozen families lodged in comparative comfort and complete cleanliness. A pale girl received me with smiles and made me free of her bed. She stood beside me while I unpacked the remains of Kuli Khan's chicken, hard now and of an unappetising colour. "It is good for you to eat," she said, as if to sit upon a bed and chew a drumstick were the natural way of dining. I offered her chocolate and biscuits. She refused. "I've already eaten," she said.

This was the first time I heard the remark that became, in my ears, the slogan of Soviet Central Asia. People had always eaten, or were going to eat at some other time. It was a fact that they did eat, because one saw them masticating in cafés and lunch-rooms, but food was always far distant from their houses. They lodged at one end of the town and ate—when they had time—at the other. Meals were no longer convivial affairs, shared by families and their friends. Each person ate by himself, much as he washed, hurriedly and at odd moments, under the public

tap. At any moment, one might find somebody cooking a scrap of a meal on a primus set on the window-sill. It was not that food was lacking. There was plenty in the shops, but was it worth while walking a couple of miles to buy vegetables or meat? Better make do with the bread in the cupboard and tea, of course.

It seemed to me that, during the hungry years of 1932 to 1934, people had got out of the habit of eating for pleasure and as a sociable business. They fed themselves instead, and it was a question of stoking a fire just before it went out. How hungry I used to be in Central Asia and how unnecessarily so, for there was always food a few miles away or about to be food at an hour which seemed to me stretched beyond the limits of endurance.

The pale girl in the lodging-house told me she'd been married for three months to a carpenter who earned 120 roubles a month. She'd come from Stalinabad, which she described as a busy city, and found little to do in Termez. She wanted friends. I think she wanted pretty clothes too, for she greatly admired my scarf and when I gave it to her, she flushed with delight and tied it cap-like on her head, fluffing out the ends of her fair hair and prinking in front of six inches of glass. I asked her if she worked in a factory. She said: "No, I am only married."

She was a Tadjik and had been to school. Her ambition was to be a teacher. "I don't really know enough, but I know more than my relations. My father can only make a sign with his thumb."

Limited Russian prevented us both from making the most of our conversation, so I tried to sleep, but whenever I opened my eyes there was the girl seated on a hard chair or the end of the bed, looking at me with an interest that seemed to me forlorn.

At eleven I thought I'd better show some interest in the matter of getting to the station, so I inquired about transport. "If the motor does not come, we shall walk," replied the girl.

I asked for water and she led me to a tap in the yard,

from which came a rusty trickle. I asked, more out of curiosity than undue optimism, if there was a lavatory. She said yes, but one could not use it, and pointed to the earth.

In the darkness—for there seemed to be only one lamp and that the property of a studious youth who sat hunched above a lexicon while his family filled the room with bulk, noise and movement—we dragged my possessions across the yard and piled them in the lane. We then sat upon the cobbles and waited. And while we waited, in the starless gloom, a peculiar thing happened. Of course, it was only really peculiar because of the darkness and the lack of explanation. But suddenly from the town there came a great clattering of hoofs and creaking of heavy wheels. Before us passed, in silhouette against the sky, the vague outline of men in great-coats with rifles across their backs. They were bent forward and they seemed to be riding furiously. The horses they bestrode, the carts that rumbled after them were invisible in the blackness which hung between the houses. Only the heads and shoulders and the sharp probes of bayonets bobbed incessantly above the screaming clamour of wheels and the hammer-on-anvil sound of metal-shod horses urged over cobbles. A strange sort of cart it must be, I thought, and how can they see in this pitch darkness? "What is it?" I asked the girl.

"I don't know," she said, with indifference.

The motor came. We arrived at the station with innumerable other people, burdened not with the ordinary luggage of travellers, but with bedding and what appeared to be a large proportion of their household goods. "They may have to wait for days before they can get a place on the train," explained the man in tweeds.

We sat at a table in the station restaurant. Local time and Moscow time conflicted on the faces of two clocks. A loudspeaker emitted a lecture on cotton. A gramophone flared. Several men with shirts or blouses belted over serviceable trousers added themselves to our party and discussed at great length—(*a*) If there was any chance of

getting a ticket; (*b*) What class of ticket it would be best to try for; (*c*) If any back-door means could be utilised and (*d*) if, having bought the ticket, it would be possible to find a seat. I had no idea that the mere fact of catching a train could be so complicated.

Everybody took for granted that I was going to Moscow and eventually, an hour after the express should have started, by one of the clocks—the other had stopped—a young soldier forced the back door of the ticket office and after an argument so violent that I thought it should have ended in murder rather than smiles all round, he emerged with a scrap of paper which he thrust into my hand. It was a third-class ticket to Moscow, price 97 roubles, and on it I could have travelled for eight days.

CHAPTER XXXI

ONE CHOOSES ONE'S FRIENDS

I DON'T remember much more about that night. For some time before the train arrived I had been asleep, with my head on a stained table-cloth. Several unknown people were using my roll of bedding as pillow and mattress combined. When the door to the platform opened, we had to push them on to the floor, where they lay, their limbs awry and still half asleep. Outside, there were more people comatose against the wall, or spread about the platform, their heads propped upon embroidered bags or suitcases of synthetic leather. Whole families were camped round the hot-water tap, with supplies of food beside them. And still, in front of the ticket-window, stretched a queue, patient, immobile and apparently three parts asleep. Each individual had propped himself against a neighbour and the end of the queue was lost in the darkness of the street.

The rush for the train left me breathless. Not being armour-plated, I should have given up and staggered into some quiet place to nurse my bruises, but unknown adherents caught me by the arms and thrust me bodily into the mass. The man in tweeds, coat and collar gone, used my dispatch case as a battering ram. Three times we were within a yard of our objective, but on each occasion some mighty Usbeg with shoulders like a bull's drove us back. Elbows were forced into our sides. Feet trod upon us. Hands seized our shoulders and unsuspected excrescences threatened our ribs. At last, with my hat obliterating one eye and a foot out of action, I was lifted by the press of my well-wishers and flung on to the step of a carriage. My head bumped against the rail. My stockings split across the knees, but I got a good hold on a solid object and

clung to it fiercely. Nothing, I felt, should dislodge me. Several bodies fell over me or on top of me before I realized that the thing I clutched was a leg.

The train showed signs of starting. Somehow I picked myself up. A dozen battered people on the edge of the fight waved to me. "You were in luck," said an unidentifiable voice, "there were very few passengers to-night."

Fussily retrieving my luggage, which was heaped above me with a bent samovar, a satchel, a baby tied to a board, some pickled melons and a kid in a basket, I battled inch by inch through the bedlam of a hard carriage which resembles a van with two layers of wooden shelves running inwards from the windows. Half-way, lack of breath forced me to give up the struggle and I subsided upon the heap of humanity occupying the open passage between the shelves. There I should have remained all night, a component of the human jelly, had not an official, doubtless warned by my friends of Termez, insinuated himself into the mass of arms, legs, bags, bodies, kettles, pipes, livestock, fruit and pillows to tell me that I could have a berth in the sleeping-car.

Some minutes later, I was apologising to a provocative blonde for what she evidently regarded as disaster. In crêpe-de-chine incrusted with lace and an aroma which I felt I ought to recognise—could it be Lanvin's "Scandale"?—she had established herself in the lower bunk, a box of chocolates beside her, a frilled pink cushion behind her head and in her hands a French novel. Before I began to undress she'd explained that her "friend," in Stalinabad, had arranged that she should have the compartment to herself, but I was too sleepy to cope with anyone so decorative and comfortable. I pretended complete lack of understanding and crawled into the upper berth.

Next day the blonde improved. Sensibly, she did not try to wash, for, as she said, "There is only enough water for tea. It is better to drink than to be clean."

We shared biscuits while the express averaged 12 to 15

miles an hour through flat country without sign of human occupation. By contrast, the Steppes of Afghanistan had been full of life. I remembered the wild horses with their manes and tails flying, the pools of wild flowers, the clusters of round black mushrooms that were yurts and the sheep spreading like shadows over the grass, while their shepherds cooked or slept or talked with sturdy riders encased in knee-boots and wadded coats.

North of the dividing river were the same great plains, but without the rich burgeoning that distinguished the province of Mazar. The grass looked grey and brittle. The only buildings huddled round the stations which were domed like mosques, with hot water taps where an outdoor pulpit might have stood. I had heard that the life of Tadjikistan centred on the railway, but all that I saw were a few new farms arranged after an urban plan, with a kerchiefed girl or a man in a Russian blouse leaning upon a wall and staring at the train. Occasionally a handful of sheep spattered the horizon, or a long dark figure, gaitered, coated and capped in the same material, so that he looked like a wadded caterpillar, rode slowly into the unending distance.

The blonde was going to Moscow. She showed me some caracul skins of a peculiar rosy fawn that she was going to have made into a coat. "Now, everything comes to Moscow," she said. "If you know where to go, you can get jewels, French hats and Viennese models. They cost something, that sees itself, but me, I like spending money and my friend, he does not mind."

For several years she'd been the mistress of a keen party worker, manager of one of the big cotton plants, an engineer by training and something of a philosopher as well. She had known the hard times when a loaf of bread cost fifty roubles and Stalinabad was still Dushambe, a village market, unaware of its industrial future. She said, "Me, I am not devoted to the idea of marriage. One can be an honest woman without all this affair of the church. But perhaps I offend you? You are devout, Madame?"

I said that I was married and went to church.

"*Tiens*, it is curious, you that have the air so intelligent!"

At that moment, the girl with her unnatural blonde hair, rigidly crimped, her skin blooming under peach powder, her breasts lifting a thin muslin blouse, her high-heeled shoes strained at the seams and her ill-shaped flesh-coloured stockings, provided an amusing contrast to the things she said. For she was no phonograph recording what others had told her. She had thought for herself. She said, "I come from a village on the Volga. I used to like going to church because it was so beautiful, but it is not right that there should be no other beauty. If you could have seen the huts where the people lived! Unclean, unwholesome! What could come of such a life?" A local factory had given her opportunity, but her imagination was not limited to the running belt. She said, "What would you? Religion gave my parents patience to endure their life and, *enfin*, it was the life of pigs! But patience is no great virtue. At the best, it is negative."

"What would you substitute?"

"Joy," she said surprisingly. "For me, that is the greatest of virtues. I would make people sing and laugh."

She had no shyness. She developed her theory of joy. "For laughter one must, of course, first have food, then a little time to consider oneself, and that has been scarce under the Soviet, but now, it is better. We do not need to work so hard. I do not altogether like work."

"Do you work?"

"Yes, I am a cashier." She said it simply as she might have said "I am a woman," for evidently everybody had to work. There was no getting away from it.

I asked her the question that I long to put to the many Bolshevic reformers who are as ascetic as Luther, as intolerant as Ignatius Loyola. "What have you given the peasants in exchange for their religion?" and she didn't answer at once in bombastic fashion. She thought for a moment, and then she said, "They are less afraid." It was, I thought, an interesting answer.

"And the Moslems down here in Usbegistan; are they unafraid?"

The girl shrugged shapely shoulders. "But it is a folly, that Islam. Imagine the life of their women, blinded by the chadour. They will recount to you horrors about what the old wicked ones did when first their daughters showed their faces on their way to college or factory, but all that is at an end. The veil, it is only now for the very ugly or the very old!" She looked out of the window, where a bent grey figure rode on the rump of a donkey, but I doubt if she saw it. Her world was bounded by the panelled walls of the compartment. Central Asia meant nothing to her. "The Usbegs do not think, so how can they be afraid," she said at last, with which shrewd comment she returned to the box of chocolates.

I made two other acquaintances on the train. One was a cotton expert, an "agranome" from Stalinabad who had travelled in other cotton-growing countries and spoke good German. He was large, with an enormous stomach at war with his belt, a shaven head exuding sweat, and a beautiful, tender mouth that never smiled. He came and leaned against the door of our compartment and ignoring the chocolate-smeared blonde, told me of Vaksh Stroi, the new hydro-electric station on the Amu Darya, with which it is hoped to irrigate 250,000 acres. He loved machinery. I could see that he felt for the great dynamos, for the power and the intricate precision of the plant, the affection that his forbears gave to a country, a faith, or a woman. His hands were long, well shaped and very strong. He used them to emphasize his meaning and when he said, "In a few years, machines will do all the work. Men will think and plan, but machines will interpret their ideas," he plaited his fingers together as if he could scarcely contain his impatience. "Men for brain," he said, "and machines for muscle. That is good."

Reflectively, the blonde stroked her arm.

My other friend was a black-browed Jew of Austrian extraction. His open shirt showed profusion of swart,

curling hair, and on his head a thicket stood up unbrushed, immensely virile. He, also, had a large stomach which went before him as he walked and a fine nose, boldly curved. His voice rumbled pleasantly from a vast chest, and his full, brown eyes held the sheen and the richness of wine. He was altogether rather a gorgeous person, curled and oiled with his own sweat, his brilliantly-striped tie hanging loose, his sleeves rolled up to show hirsute fore-arms, his shoes a glossy yellow and a skull cap embroidered with roses adhering to the last outrageous tuft of hair, blue-black and shining. This Jew, a doctor earning, in three different capacities, 4500 roubles a month, was one of the kindest people I met in the Soviet Central Asian Republics where, with the exception of the older Moslems, everyone, it seemed to me, was shorn of the agreeable decoration of manners so that they pushed, shouted, swore, spat, belched, planted good sound blows when necessary, ignored the more ordinary regulations of hygiene, were at times frankly unclean and at others indecent, while yet they were filled to the brim with an abundant, patient and effective kindness.

Everybody on the train told me not to get off at Kagan. They explained with a wealth of detail that I should find neither transport nor lodging, that even Russian would be very little good to me in Bokhara where most people would speak Usbeg. They assured me that never, never would I be able to get on to another train. Why, in fact, did I want to relinquish so enviable a position? There certainly wouldn't be another sleeping car for a week. A berth might not be available for months.

All I could do was to repeat that I wanted to see Bokhara, upon which, since I was evidently a lunatic to be humoured, they wrote out every conceivable sentence in Russian and pressed the endless scraps of paper into my hands with more and more advice.

We reached Kagan, hours late, but by this time there was so much divergence between the few watches in the sleeping car that it might have been dawn or midnight,

except for the sun which I thought indicated mid-afternoon. As soon as the train stopped the Jewish doctor seized my luggage and with it descended upon the heads of the crowd. The platform was invisible. I followed in the wake of space caused by his bulk, but at the gate two Usbegs, equally determined, fought for passage. Their sanguine faces blazed under their skull-caps, skirts flared, embroidered waistcoats flapped. In my anxiety not to lose sight of the doctor, I found myself between their blows and I don't know what would have happened had not one cursed the other in a formula I understood. Panting, dusty and dishevelled, I selected the most caustic Koranic phrase I could remember and shrieked it at the still apparently "True-Believers." Aghast, they fell back upon their female belongings and I was precipitated through the gate to tumble upon my knees in the dust and a heap of sour gourds. I wondered then if the whole of my journey would be accomplished in such fashion. I was trying to arrive everywhere on knees already skinned.

"Come quick!" shouted the doctor, "I must show you to the woman in the ticket office." Dumping my luggage in the middle of the lane, he seized my arm and dragged me to a shed where he bobbed down before an opening that appeared to have no particular purpose. Through it he addressed a moving appeal to a woman whose bust I could just see. After a while he pulled me down beside him and adjured the lady belonging to the bust, "Take a good look at her. There, you will recognise her again, won't you? You can see she's not like anyone else." With which startling comment on my appearance, he took my ticket from me, gave it to the lady to stamp, and shepherding me back into the lane, said all in one breath, "She will help you to get on a train. There is one at eight sometimes or perhaps ten, if you are here by six, it will be early enough."

"Morning or night?" I asked, trotting beside him.

"I don't know. Better say six in the morning. Then you will surely be in time and if you miss the first train,

you can catch the next. I think there is one nearly every day, or twice a week certainly."

I glanced at the haphazard frame buildings bordering the dust of the lane. None of the stalls or sheds offered much chance of lodging.

Beside my luggage, with which nobody had interfered, the doctor paused to give further advice. "Wait here," he said. "There will be an autobus. Look, all these people are waiting for it and they will certainly be kind to you."

To the crowd which would have filled far more than one autobus, the doctor, now speaking in the voice of a mother about to be deprived of an unweaned child, addressed a plea which I partially understood. It referred to my lack of any normal language and touched, I fear, upon the entire want of intelligence which had placed me in the dust of that particular lane, ending with an appeal to all these good comrades to see that I got somewhere as soon as possible.

"Yes, yes, Tovarisch. We will look after her," said a dozen voices and with repeated instructions to me to do everything *but* wear flannel next the skin, the doctor raced back to the train which would probably not start for another two hours or more.

CHAPTER XXXII

SEVEN MILES TO BOKHARA

I SAT upon my bedding and answered such questions as I understood. Everybody was very kind, and they went on being kinder and kinder as the hours wore on and it became evident that either the autobus had already departed or would not leave till the next day. About five, while I ate a small apple provided by a spectacled youth with a portfolio under his arm, who read innumerable sheets of typing while he leaned upon nothing more helpful than his own backbone, under a blazing sun, a truck rolled down the lane. It was already overfilled, I thought, with workers returning from the cotton-fields, but several of my companions rushed after it, asking for a lift, and so great is the adaptability of the Tartar or the Mongol body that where no particle of space could be observed, the newcomers were yet absorbed, and the black-bloused mass, readjusting itself to the extra particles, appeared as solid as before.

"You must get into the next truck," said a man in a neat brown suit, whom I took to be a professor; but the spectacled youth disagreed. "What would be the good? She would not know where to go."

Both points of view received support from the crowd, whose components argued about me as if I were a piece of baggage, and when, at last, another truck, full to overflowing, appeared, the professor shouted at the driver and, seizing me by the arm, prepared to run after the vehicle in a fog of dust. Unfortunately, the spectacled youth had taken firm hold of my coat and would not let go. Between the two of them, I had no volition, but as men were already seated on the bonnet of the truck and girls balanced, apparently, on the mudguards, I was relieved that the professor

did not get his way. While the two of them argued violently, each maintaining a hold upon my person, a young woman of brittle and shrewd appearance thrust herself through the remnants of the crowd and said to me in excellent English: "If you wish to go to Bokhara, I have a motor."

Naturally, words flowed from me, but unfortunately they flowed also from my self-constituted guards, so that it was in a spate of speech that we all rambled round the corner in the wake of the tall thin young woman, with wisps of pale hair protruding under her beret. The motor resolved itself into an empty truck. Into this I climbed and somebody flung my baggage after me. "Give the porter three roubles," instructed the professor. I had not noticed that the man who had spent the last few hours seated on my despatch-case was a porter, but I gave him a thirty-rouble note by mistake. He objected to this with such violence that I offered him more, upon which he threw up his hands to heaven, refused everything and disappeared.

For some reason unknown to me, the truck-driver objected to taking any other passengers, so off we clattered over cobblestones and ruts, the girl and I seated at times upon the dusty floor, at times in the air a good way above it, because it is extremely difficult to adhere to an empty two-ton truck furiously driven over an enterprising road.

I'd hoped, of course, for the fullest possible explanations, but in the intervals of bumping against each other and clinging feverishly to the tailboard, I discovered that my rescuer knew scarcely more than those words of English with which she had framed her invitation, and understood nothing at all. Our conversation became, therefore, preposterous. In the oddest combinations of languages, she told me of a hotel kept by her mother and herself, but just as I was congratulating myself on having, as I thought, arranged my lodging in Bokhara, I realised that the hotel belonged to some brief period of her childhood when her people were fugitives in New York.

Similarly, when I asked about the condition of the Usbeg peasants whom I saw working—in a state of sartorial transition between the chapan and the zipp-fastened Russian blouse—in the cotton-fields, she thought I referred to the seeds which had not yet been sown and her reply was to the effect that if they—to me, the peasants—got enough water, they would be prolifically fruitful, but that many of them had been sterile in recent years.

By this time, we were both so bewildered that further speech failed us.

In silence we bumped between one-storeyed houses that looked raw and unfinished, between willows, plough and weeds, for it was an untidy strip of country, half-converted to the needs of the road. There was no traffic, except an occasional foot-passenger as we neared the town. I noticed that the old men clung to their local dress, but their chapans were not so spendidly floral as in Afghanistan. Tattered gaiters often took the place of knee-boots and their fur hats or embroidered caps were very dirty. The young men were Russian in all but their ripe red faces with narrow eyes and Mongol cheekbones, and the solitary splash of colour they allowed themselves upon their heads.

At every moment I expected Bokhara to rise magnificently out of the plain. The city must be worthy of its story. For close upon a thousand years it had been a centre of learning, the goal of philosophers, scientists, poets and historians. To blue Bokhara, with its population of 150,000, its 150 colleges and schools, had come learned men and famous men from every part of Asia. In the paved courts of the Chir Arab medersa, or under the porticoes of the eleventh century Kalan mosque, imams who had studied for twenty years to obtain that honoured title had discussed rhetoric, logic, history, theology, the Hadith or Sayings of the Prophet Mohammed, and the science of Magic or the Hundred Names of God, with pupils who in their turn had carried the knowledge acquired in Bokhara to the boundaries of Islam, as far East as Pekin, as far West as Morocco.

I imagined, of course, the Bokhara which was already passing in the nineteenth century, a city older than Samarkand, with a history more cruel. For the tyranny of the Emirs, who ruled for 700 years, had no equal even in Asian history. In the middle ages the town belonged to saints, professors and storks, and before the war of 1914 to storks, carpet-makers and students destined to form the "Young Bokharan" party, originally nationalists and liberals, later national socialists economically bound to the Soviet who supplied them with arms and a practical purpose. But always that same town was at the mercy of despots who, from the twelfth century, when the "Great Lion" Alp Arslan built the citadel, hung a six-thonged whip over the gates of their fortress as the symbol of a power which they expressed by massacre and torture.

I knew that the Bokhara which had been the Oxford and the Heidelberg of Asia had fallen, but I imagined a still gracious ruin, girt by a thousand tombs and crowned by domes and towers, still blue as the sky or the sea-coloured tiles of Mazar. I pictured the great walls, ten unbroken miles of them rising straight out of the earth like the smooth mud ramparts of Jellalabad, uniting furrow and cloud. I visualised the eleven gates that were closed at night and the huge, blind fissures of the streets driving through the maze of walled courts which enclosed the houses that were also tombs.

Then, some eight miles from the railway and Kagan, we came to what appeared to be an eruption of drains and tunnels. In a fog of dust which hung low above the ground, it seemed that some stupendous excavations had been interrupted. On either side of the road, now a deeply-sunk lane, were rows of what might have been huge clay pipes, with here and there a domed cistern. In reality we drove through perhaps the largest graveyard in existence, for here were the tombs of a thousand years, of citizens, seers and pilgrims, of all who, throughout history, had wished to be buried in the holy ground of Bokhara. The tombs were often heaped one upon another

course of time, the lower ones had crumbled back into the earth and the upper sagged at curious angles. Over the whole round-backed mass, rubble and dust had drifted, so that only the broken domes and a few of the newer cubes stood clear of the rubbish.

I insisted on stopping the truck, and for a few moments I wandered in the city of death. Ankle-deep, sometimes knee-deep in sand, I ploughed my way between the tombs. From some of them fluttered rags and tufts of hair. Others had so far decayed that bones and even rotting stuffs were visible among scraps of broken tiling, earth and the leaves of another year.

I had heard that the tomb of the Samanid Ishmael, said by some to be the oldest monument in Turkestan, had disappeared altogether in the sand, but it had been partly excavated and in another direction Chetchma Ayoub—fount of Job—rose as a solitary cone above the anonymity of the dead. Legend has it that Job, much wearied with discussion, that habit of old Bokhara, stooped here to drink and immediately a spring gushed for his benefit while sheltering creepers blossomed round him.

Steps shuffled after me and the odd, pale girl whose figure and face showed lines without curves, stood beside me, wrinkling her nose. "How it smells of death," she said, "and we will soon enough be dead."

I understood her meaning, if not all her words. And as we went back to the truck, I marvelled at the secure continuity in the Moslem mind which sees death as a pause to be recorded, but never accentuated. In companionable comfort the living and the dead pursue their course together, so that it is not surprising if a father is buried on the roof of the house and the whole family make holiday beside the tomb of a favourite ancestor.

In the same fog of dust we came to the huge broken ramparts which stem the flood of tombs. There seemed to be little difference between air and earth. The narrow streets tunnelled into the dust. High up, where the haze

)eath, reputed to be the tallest in Asia. It seemed to me aguely Florentine, and I wondered if the beauty of its roportions and the unusual, arched gallery at the top vould console one for being forced to recite the virtues of ıe Emir before being flung headlong, at his behest, upon ıe stones below.

For an instant I saw also the four lovely minarets of :hor Minor. Each of them was helmeted in blue and upon he top of these last exquisite tiles, perched four storks' ests, shaggy as the Turkoman hats and equally out of roportion.

While I was still turning giddily from side to side to ook at the façade of some great medersa from which the lue was peeling, at the flanking minarets broken like ranches, or worn down as burned-out candles, or at the lutter of domed markets which still burrow between the ewer buildings, the truck swerved into a square.

A promising, but untidy garden bloomed within its ailings. A cinema was in process of construction. Across he cobbled street, the Gastronomical Co-operative offered fabulous selection of tinned food and other luxuries at rices ranging between three and five times those of Western Europe.

A girl in a white overall, with a fringed scarf over her ead, sold soft drinks, violently pink and red, in a striped iosk. There were no flags or posters. Seedy shops ccupied two sides of the square. The others looked nfinished, perhaps because the museum still hesitated, fter having been so long a mosque, and the remainder of ıe buildings appeared equally uncertain as to their purpose. ut the people who wandered about on the edge of the arden or strolled most cheerfully in the dust seemed to e particularly well satisfied with themselves and their rroundings.

I noticed the young girls, sunburned and solid-looking, ith inexpressive Usbeg features and the muscles given ıem by Soviet gymnasiums. Here was a vast improve-ıent on the womanless streets of Afghanistan. But while,

still sitting on the edge of the truck, I wondered how far and how deep the change had gone, the long, pale young woman who had been in America disappeared. Without leave-taking she vanished and immediately I felt as deserted as an indifferent swimmer when his rubber horse deflates.

An amiable crowd gathered round me, but they shook their heads at the starkness of my few Russian words. They could not read the sentences written by my friends on the train. So there I was, speechless, in a town which promised no lodging of any sort and as I'd last eaten—the strong-smelling remains of Kuli Khan's chicken—some seven hours ago, I was distraught by hunger as well as ignorance.

Voices told me, or I thought they told me, that there was no hotel. There never had been any hotel. The crowd began to disperse. I saw myself forever sitting in the dust, a monument that would crumble even faster than the Tombs of Imams and Sherifs.

In despair, I appealed to the truck-driver who, having rid himself of my luggage, was already letting in the clutch. What I said I really don't know, but it must have been most moving, for this strong and swart young man—by the way, how few old people one sees in the new towns of Central Asia—leaped to the ground, gathered up my belongings and was back beside me with a comforting gesture, "Yes, yes, I will find you somewhere to sleep. Myself, I have a bed. If it comes to the worst, it is large." Upon the dust of the windscreen, he drew a bed of ample proportions and made cheerful and kindly gestures, intended also to be reassuring.

CHAPTER XXXIII

IN SEARCH OF A BED

We drove a considerable way, and Bokhara became more attractive. It seemed to me then that the new town was growing rapidly upon the tombs and the ruins that, disintegrating, covered the earth and filled the air with dust. Here and there above the flat roofs of the typical mud-built houses rose, like stage scenery, the façades of mosques or medersas. They had no backs. The architects of Central Asia, in that golden age when Bokhara and Samarkand were the greatest markets on the caravan route from China to India and the West, had built with perishable materials. They were only concerned with the immediate effect of their work upon the beholder.

There is a flowery delicacy about the blue and yellow tiling in some of the colleges. The frescoes of Abdul Aziz show traces of original design. Proportion and line are sometimes admirable, but the scheme is always unfinished. The great façade, once splendidly but unimaginatively tiled with its formalised arches flanking the Iwan, had no back at all. Hence the stage effect. However lovely the façade, however grandiose the court into which it leads, there is always the moment when one looks up and sees nothing but mud. And in Bokhara the fallen, the mud is always visible.

When the driver pointed proudly to the citadel, the Ark of Alp Arslan, it might have been some colossal sand castle built by children, for earth is more apparent than stone and different generations have heaped the buildings one above another within the great wall supposed to be a mile in circumference which protected the Emirs from the vengeance of their subjects.

In front of the Ark I noticed an excessively hideous

modern water-tower consisting of a galvanised iron cylinder mounted on metal staging, and beyond it the bewildering beauty of the Bala Khan mosque, now a club. I had hardly time to appreciate the row of slender columns with their pineapple capitals and the red and gold that clung to the heavily beamed ceiling above the arched portico, when the truck came to a standstill before a building which had none of these graces. It was solid and plain, with large windows, most of which were still sealed by the new paint on their woodwork. Its colour was that greyish drab that reduces to the semblance of slabs of cheap soap all the new houses in Moscow or Leningrad.

Propelled by my companion through the door and into an office containing a bed, a desk, a pile of new tick pillows, a samovar and an enormous clock, I found myself confronted by a young Jewess with blue-black plaits and a shawl of many colours. She had a face of the finest ivory and a bitter mouth. I liked looking at her, but she regarded me with some distaste.

An argument ensued, after which the young woman asked me for 12 roubles and an account of my business in Bokhara.

"Tourist," I replied, but the word meant nothing to her.

Laboriously she copied the number of my passport and a quantity of irrelevant details applicable more to the Chamberlain family than to myself. After all this, she left me sitting on the bed, while bent over a ledger she counted on her fingers, her lips moving and her eyes straying to an abacus, with most of the beads missing.

After a while I said, "Comrade, is it not possible to eat or sleep?" and I showed her my beautiful Russian sentences which had regard to baths, food, beds, and transport.

She answered, "I do not read Russian," but she took me upstairs to a white-washed room, very clean, with six iron beds in it. An electric bulb hung from the ceiling, but there was no current. A lamp which gave about as much light as a candle stood on a table heaped with books,

writing materials, a kettle, three teapots, a primus, towels, toothbrushes, and some clothing. Coats hung against the wall. There was one chair which held a satchel and a pair of boots. The uncurtained window looked across greyish mud roofs to the fantastically stuffless façades of twin medersas confronting each other like sheets of cardboard.

My watch, which during the last twenty-four hours had been so often readjusted that it bore no relation whatsoever to Moscow time or any other time, marked 6.15 p.m., but it was quite dark. "Comrade, could I buy anything to eat?"

"In the bazaar," said the daughter of that famous race, the Bokharan Jews.

Calculating that the nearest bazaar must be two miles distant, I decided that a bath would have to take the place of a meal. Apart from the soot-filled pannikins of Mazar and the buckets full of mysterious fluid which George had conjured from the villages of the Kush, I hadn't had a bath since leaving Bamyan. So it was with delight that I discovered at the end of the passage, an enormous tin coffin with a tap at either end. The door leading to this paradise would not lock, but, undeterred, I shed my clothing—the dirtiest of shirts and a skirt whose brown had become grey. The water was ice-cold and there was no plug to the bath, but, completely happy, I stood at one end of it, soaping vigorously and pouring spongefuls of water over my shoulders. Footsteps approached. I protested—in English, Russian, and what I thought might possibly be Central Asian! The door opened. There entered an enormous Usbeg in a flowered chapan girt with pistols, knives, and so far as I could see in the guttering light a considerable amount of household ironmongery. Clutching the sponge as a buckler, I begged him immediately to leave. Instead, he hung coat and shirt over the top of the partition. Booted, he got into the bath. "Do not disturb yourself, Comrade," he said, or I supposed he said, for he spoke in Usbeg, "I will use the other tap."

This he proceeded to do, an intricately embroidered

cap on his head, his legs in solid leather, the rest of him bare.

Ignoring me completely, he had a good wet shower, gargled majestically, spat in all directions, and offered me his soap when mine slithered under the bath. He also proffered something which I took to be a comb until I noticed it was without teeth, scratched his back vigorously with this same implement and called after me, when I left, what I imagined to be the local equivalent of "Good luck" or the Afghan "Go without trouble."

Back in the dormitory, I found the modern form of Usbeg—black blouse, zipp-fastened, shiny leather belt, trousers dark and very narrow, satchel and black cap—seated on the next bed to mine, examining his bare toes. Two other young men were bent over the table, looking for matches and arguing apparently as to who had lost them. An old woman was giving them a piece of her mind. She held a glass of muddy brown liquid that bore some resemblance to tea.

Draped in a wholly unsuitable dressing-gown of black satin patterned with storks, I bore down upon her and asked for food. The barefooted youth understood. He explained at length to his companions. Other young people came in. A very old man, grey, hairless, hollow, was extracted from some cubby-hole. "Give him a rouble for two eggs," instructed the first black blouse, "and another rouble—that will buy a couple of breads—twenty kopeks for tea and, yes, eighty kopeks for himself. He will have to walk a long way——"

"Lak-lak!" suddenly enunciated the old woman, who had remained mute during the discussion, and she flung herself upon my dressing-gown and held up a fold upon which a green and white stork flew furiously with yellow legs extended. She would have dragged me to the window to show me the nests of "lak-laks" upon every roof and every broken minaret, but the second black blouse was fingering the silk. "Artificial," he pronounced, for he was floor-foreman in Bokhara's biggest silk factory and there-

fore interested in quality and design, "but it is original. We cannot yet make such large patterns."

Realising that a technical discussion would now inevitably ensue, I left the dressing-gown to its critics and got into bed. The sheets were coarse and clean. I used my own pillow. It was too hot to need anything else.

After I'd been asleep for what seemed to me hours, an earthquake happened and I woke to find one of the young men, still black bloused, shaking my shoulder. Food had arrived. So also had a girl with a scar which lifted her upper lip and made of her quite ordinary prettiness something unusual and arresting. She sat on the end of my bed while I ate one good white roll and one egg boiled hard as wood and drank hot water faintly brown and equally faintly tea-flavoured.

The three black blouses gathered round. The one who spoke a few words of German interpreted at length. I learned that the girl drove a lorry for one of the cotton farms and that the men who had been looking for matches were respectively a teacher and a curator at the new museum.

"Are you a doctor?" they asked.

Convinced that I must have some profession in this earnest, new Asia, I replied, "A student."

The term, vague as it was, satisfied my companions. For it is still the ardent desire of Russian or Russianised youth to study, it hardly matters what so long as it leads to a university, or to those night classes which impair the health of already overwrought shock workers in factories and farms.

When I next went to sleep it was to the reiteration of the number of new buildings in Bokhara, where nothing should ever be new. I dreamed of Vambéry who, disguised as a pilgrim in turban and long dust-coloured robe, wandered through the old city and even read the Koran on the steps of the Chir Arab medersa, in the days when the infidel who set foot within the holy portals of Bokhara

lost his tongue and his eyes before he was, most mercifully, permitted to lose his life.

I woke to all the sounds that six tired bodies can make upon six unresponsive iron stretchers, and I thought, for no reason at all, of Joseph Wolff, an English clergyman who, without other disguise than his college gown, appeared before the startled eyes of the Emir Nasir Ullah, murderer of five brothers on his way to the throne, made infamous by the title of "hound that starves for blood." For he had been nourished by a Kazak foster-mother and the Kazaks are called eaters of men and accused of feeding on the corpses of their enemies. Wolff made the perilous journey from London in 1843 to enquire about the fate of a business mission headed by Stoddart and Connolly, and the Emir expressed his amazement that whereas he could kill as many Persians as he liked without anyone bothering about them, he had hardly touched the Englishmen before an envoy "in black and red" arrived to demand their release.

Beside me, the cotton expert snored. The windows were hermetically closed. Insects beat against the glass. Something scurried across the new plaster. Flakes fell. And sweat trickled down my neck. It wasn't at all the Bokhara that I had expected. But, completely happy, I slept.

CHAPTER XXXIV

OLD AND NEW BOKHARA

NEXT morning, with the office clock registering five a.m. and the sun already high, I walked through the lanes of the old town with my friend, the black-bloused teacher. Parents who had inherited the faith of Islam, with the business of making heelless yellow slippers and a mud house built round a pool that was never cleaned, had called him Ali, but at school, he himself had added the Russian appellative of Ivan.

"This will all go," said Ivan Ali, sweeping a long arm round the cool clay walls that gave us shade; "and already, you see, it is clean."

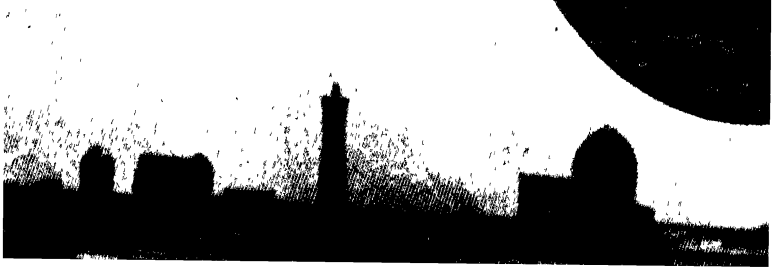
Nondescript women, their faces exposed, although they still wore the cloak that used to imprison their forbears in shapeless anonymity, were emptying buckets of water upon the dust. A sharp smell rose to meet us. Ivan Ali sniffed it with pleasure and explained that from the Zeravshan river, which could be seen trickling across the plain, at least a hundred conduits had brought water to the thirsty town. In the days of the Emirs, every mosque and medersa had had its stagnant pool, or "chau," which bred the germs of malaria, guinea worm and elephantiasis. The public squares and many of the blind-walled houses between which we were now passing had delighted in the same kind of cistern, surrounded by mulberries and acacias wherein the people washed themselves, their utensils, their clothes and their corpses and from which they drew water for cooking and drinking.

"All that is now finished," said the young reformer. "The chaus have been emptied. There is a pumping

Ruined façade of the largest college in Bokhara.

The Chor Minor mosque, the oldest at Bokhara, now a cotton warehouse. Storks' nests on the minarets.

Old Bokhara, with the Tower of Death, one of the oldest monuments in Central Asia, seen above the roof of the new power-house. The photograph was taken from the top of the citadel.



View of old Samarkand with ruins of the Registan and Bibi Khanaum in distance. Taken from the roof of Tamarlane's tomb.

station and running water, a reservoir with a sand filter-
He added a description of the Institute of Tropical Research which now dealt effectively with the plagues that the Emir's subjects had supposed to be the will of Allah and for which the old Tabibs, sitting cross-legged upon their prayer-carpets beside the infected chau, with the blue shadow of a mosque reaching over them, had prescribed poultices and prayer.

It was cool in the old town and the lanes wandered deliciously between the walls that had long ago been made of mud dampened with camel's urine, mixed with chopped straw, shaped and smoothed by hand. Sometimes we crossed one of the empty water channels by a frail and delicate bridge. Under a huge tree, in front of a mosque, women were distributing milk to rows of complacent children. Older people, in the rough garb of peasants, were sitting on bright carpets, eating a thick soup with lumps of rice in it. There was no air of poverty about the scene, only the habitual hospitality of Islam, but it was curious to see unveiled women taking the place of the Mullah or the Imam.

It occurred to me then that I was very hungry. I enquired of my companion whether he had any ideas on the subject of food. He said, "In your country you must eat a lot," and his flat Usbeg features registered a polite reproach.

Diffidently, I expatiated on the convenience of breakfast before an unlimited walk, but the young man had more to tell me. He said, "In every street there used to be a mosque. Now most of them are schools——" And indeed, from several lovely buildings with faint colour clinging to the roofs and the slenderest of columns soaring above the outer walls, came the sound of harsh young voices raised in that monotonous repetition which all over the world denotes a lesson.

At last, Ivan Ali stooped through a door and following him, I found myself in what had once been the prayer chamber of a mosque. The beams of the roof were

proudly painted. Rows of wooden columns with palm-leaf capitals supported the arches over the pulpit and the niche that is always turned toward Mecca. Traces of frescoes remained upon the walls. There was an unusual delicacy about the honeycombed ceiling and in sheltered corners, a rich, soft glow of colour.

"This is one of the largest schools," muttered my companion. "There are a hundred pupils, nearly all Usbegs, a few Jews and Tadjiks."

Next moment, we were in a long white-washed room with cloistral arches and a wooden counter across the end. At a table a number of boys were eating, reading or talking. Having been introduced to a dusky young man, unshaven, rubicund, and expert in German, I looked with interest at all this very new material produced by the Soviet on a loom which we, in India and to a certain extent the French in Cochin China and North Africa have always imagined to be incapable of modernisation. Boys and girls looked equally healthy and as cheerful as any other young people conscious of agreeable opportunity. How few years ago, these girls, blinded by the horsehair chadour, would have been picking their way through the dirt of bazaars which could never be more to them than a striped and shadowed mass. Most of them, at thirteen and fourteen, would already have been mothers, their babies diseased if they had not died at birth. All of them would have been the witless and the helpless possessions of men, perhaps three or even four times their age, whom they'd never seen until their wedding night. The boys would have been free of that tortured world where, under the Emirs, slavery, polygamy and sodomy flourished with the making of eunuchs and those strange associations which, in womanless Islam, send men walking hand in hand with flowers behind their ears.

Now they were all discussing the local sports in which teams of both sexes were to compete. The boys wore loose blouses, white or black, belted above their narrow trousers. In defiance of custom, their heads were bare and their hair cut in European fashion. The girls were neatly shingled

and they wore overalls of gaily coloured prints. They looked strong and well fed, which reminded me of my own emptiness.

Determinedly, I addressed the young Professor who was confiding to me the details of the curriculum. "I'm awfully sorry, but it's no use my trying to listen till I've had something to eat."

He looked at me with a mixture of amazement and horror. "Did you say you were hungry?" he faltered, as if he scarcely liked to voice so shameful a question.

"I did—and I am—very, very hungry."

"But you must eat then! What would you like? There is everything, everything——"

He glanced, somewhat wildly, at the counter on which eggs, bread, and glasses of sour milk were displayed. The "everything" resolved itself into a combination of these three products, and I ate voraciously.

It was then, after some discussion, conceded to be 10 o'clock. Determined not to starve further, I bought another roll for 20 kopeks and two eggs for 80.

The Professor, who had already offered to make me a present of his day, regardless of what happened to his classes during his absence, kindly placed my purchases in his satchel among the papers he would correct that evening, and after much talk with the pupils who, from the age of twelve upwards, all wanted to know about the wages and the living conditions of British workmen, and some conversation with the director, who was concerned with the possibility of a war, with Russia, France and England on one side, Germany and Japan on the other, we regained the street.

"Now," said the Professor cheerfully; "we must walk."

Walk we did. In fact we hardly stopped walking—under a blazing sun, in a temperature which at noon reached 96° Fahrenheit. There was nothing else to do.

In the main square, framed on one side by the mass of the Citadel, and on two others by the new university, the "hotel" where I lodged, the Bala Khan mosque and

another club, I saw a woman hunched upon a donkey. She was without individuality or shape. Dust furred the black parandja which covered her like a sack. Her breath had moistened the stiff horsehair veil (chadour) which hung from brow to thigh and a mass of flies had settled upon the damp patch over her mouth. Within a few yards of her a dozen girls in shorts and brief shirts open at the neck were running round the rather tenuous public gardens. They were hatless in spite of the sun and richly burned. They ran well, with heads back and chests out. There was a lusty gaiety about them that accentuated the contrast supplied by the black bundle of a preceding generation padding in a furrow of dust upon the donkey.

There came the snort and snuffle of a choked horn and a lorry bucketed past us. The driver was a girl, dark-haired, with thin, definite features. A handkerchief printed with red roses was tied across her head. Her hands gripped the wheel. She stared in front of her, tight-lipped, tremendously concentrated. When the dust cleared, I saw a peasant in skull-cap and felt gaiters, his coats bulging one over the other, licking the sand off the sweetmeats on his tray and rubbing them with a dirty finger before he replaced them. His eyes were set, each in a star of flies. Liquid trickled from the corners of them and from his nose.

CHAPTER XXXV

SURPRISING CONVERSATION ON A RUBBISH-HEAP

FIRST we went to the Citadel and there I acquired more friends, for the officials who, if municipal, were Usbegs, slow, solid and cautious, and if political were Russian, or half Russian, quicker, more authoritative and with a more imaginative friendliness, all seemed gratified that a stranger had taken so much trouble to visit Bokhara. The first demand for my passport caused me considerable unease, for I visualised at best an ignominious ejection, but the bar-sinister in the form of that ominous word "transit" passed unnoticed. And the only untoward occurrence was when somebody leaned upon the Professor's satchel and my reserve of eggs, erroneously believed to have been hard-boiled, burst over his papers.

"It does not matter at all," he said, as he wiped up the sticky yellow mess with official blotting paper, using the nearest pen to separate the more important documents. "How could such a small thing matter?"

Gravely impressed, I followed a uniformed personage on to the roof from where half a dozen of us climbed to an acre of rubble and broken walls that constituted the summit of the colossal mound to which the buildings clung like swarming bees. From the extreme end, where the rampart sagged, we could look across the new power-house, roofed with red corrugated iron, that symbol of quick and unimaginative progress, so hideous and so easily adjusted, to the old city. It was only a few hundred yards away, yet, by reason of the surrounding flatness and of the dust which magnified and distorted the distance, it stood as it were on the skyline. The splendid grouping of the Kalan mosque and the colossal Chir Arab medersa culminated in the Tower

of Death. I could see the whole magnificent height of it rising spear-like above the broken arches and the domes, two of them still luminously blue.

"A grand sight," said the Professor with heartfelt satisfaction.

It seemed to me more sad than grand and though I could visualise the terror and the cruelty which the monument must have meant to an oppressed people with neither will nor hope but that, by some oversight of the Emir, they might remain unnoticed and unplundered in that small, cramped position to which it had pleased Allah to call them, in the hot, thick light that poured over the ruins there was a tenderness of beauty that obliterated the original significance of the Tower.

"Do you not agree? Is it not grand?" insisted the Professor.

"Lovely," I said vaguely and I wondered if it were true that one staunch rebel had refused to praise the Emir before he died and a harried executioner had cut off his limbs one by one and thrown them from the curiously alien gallery at the summit, without breaking the obstinate silence of his victim. How difficult was death! How long it took to die!

"Progress is always lovely," said the Professor, not without unction, and I realised that all his approbation had been for the new electric power-house. No doubt old Bokhara was an eyesore to him. It was useless and unhygienic.

Subsequently, we saw all that is left of the Emir's palace, which now provides lodging for officials.

A wide spiral roadway leads up from the great gate over which, for seven centuries, used to hang the six-thonged leather knout, thick as a young larch. On either side are the dungeons. Here the despot's victims were crushed to death between spikes, or eaten alive by peculiarly ferocious bugs accustomed to raw meat, unless they were beheaded on to a red-hot tray. In this case, the torture continued after death, for, according to local report, during

the space of a few seconds, the decapitated head moved and winced upon the searing metal.

I remember the remains of a lovely building which had been the throne room of the Emir. Only an arched niche remained, vividly blue, and some fragments of a canopy. Beside the roadway, leading to a confusion of offices and lodgings, set apart, definitely, as if it belonged to a more leisured and decorative existence, I saw a delicate small building that might have been a sleeping apartment, or the site of private audiences. The colours of the ceiling had faded. The beams were crumbling, but the columns, as slender as young palms, and the exquisite springing arches were still intact. I imagined a scent that was not of these days and, momentarily, I visualised the savagery and the splendour of a house which had fallen, not to an invading army, but to its own people. Then the Professor began to talk, or perhaps he just continued talking, for words were his natural state.

So I learned of the first schools founded by the Jadids, afterwards the Young Bokharans, as a protest against the ignorance fostered by the ruling house and supported by the Mufti and the Qadis. Those schools were forcibly closed amidst a spate of imprisonment, bastinadoing and executions. "Your country helped the Emir," insisted the speaker and he reminded me how, after the February revolution (1917), Colonel Miller came as a representative of Kerensky's Government with promises of support for the Emir, Olim Khan, against the young revolutionaries. And once again I was amazed at the contrast between the liberty of England and the tyranny for which, in her insensate determination to support "the existing order," she has so well and truly fought abroad.

The Jadids were the equivalent of the young Turks. They demanded a constitution such as the famous or infamous Abdul Hamid had been forced to grant in Constantinople.

In March, 1917, hard-pressed by an army of farmers, carpet- and silk-weavers, coachmen, water-carriers, street-

sweepers, tanners, dyers and sweetmeat-sellers, led by students, the Emir made a parade of granting the mildest of their demands. He promised a printing press and the release of political prisoners, but, at the last moment, he substituted a general thrashing. The arms of the jailers must have ached, for youths who had asked for education instead of slavery, received 100 and 150 lashes apiece. The old peasant leader, Mirza Nasrullah Abdugafar died under the knout. Bleeding pulp, his followers were thrown into cells to rot.

But by October of the same year the Russian revolution had succeeded as far South as Tashkent, the seat of an Imperial governor, capital of Czarist Central Asia. Encouraged, Usbegs, Tadjiks, Khirgiz, rose against the Mullahs and the Beys, spiritual and material despots plundering in the name of church or state. The Khan of Kiva was deposed and Olim Khan forced by Faisullah Khodshayev, then the leader of the Young Bokharans, now President of the Nationalist and yet Soviet Republic of Usbegistan, to grant a constitution.

The natural result of such a concession was a massacre and in March, 1918, the Emir exceeded all his former efforts in the way of slaughter. According to the official records—and it is doubtful if these include the names of half the victims—over 3,000 men and boys who preferred newspapers to sermons, schools and clubs to the mosques, were first tortured and then, if life still lingered, murdered by methods which had best not be described.

Without looking at me, the Professor emphasised his point. "Olim Khan would never have dared to do this, but for the English army of intervention and the hundreds of White Russian officers who had supported a tyranny far greater than even you English Tories can attribute to the Soviet."

Speechless, I considered a situation in which the worst tyrant of Asia fought unbelieving youth with the money and arms of unbelievers, held progress at bay with the troops of European liberalism.

Faced with such political contradictions, the Young Bokharans became Communist. By September, 1920, the whole country was in revolt and with his ministers, eunuchs, wives, slaves, concubines and singing boys, Olim Khan fled across the Afghan frontier. That was the end of the Emirate and the end, too, of the knout which had hung over the gate of the citadel.

"That's all very well," said I, firmly, "but there has been a lot of shooting since then. What about the nomads who wouldn't give up their herds and the farmers who wanted to grow grain for their own use instead of cotton for the state?"

Now the Professor was only a youth, barely twenty-three, the son of a peasant, with a flat, round face and stubborn eyes. By no means an intellectual, he was forced to make up for his lack of eloquence by the number of his words. Terribly earnest, he creased his smooth Mongol forehead into a frown and twisted his body to match. Among many things he said: "Don't you see tyranny can only be of the individual, not of the masses. When the whole of a people want something, would die for it and live for it, it becomes justice, not tyranny. If a few insist on opposing a plan that means salvation"—he used a biblical word, so near was he still to the faith of his fathers—"they must die. They are no use. Worse, they are harmful. What you English did and have always done —you do it to-day whenever there is opportunity—is to try and impose the will of a few ignorants upon the many who are slowly learning. That 'will' is a corpse. Don't your people see how infected and decayed is the system of slavery, immorality, corruption and religious humbug they would reimpose instead of this Soviet system, harsh maybe, but clean and full of purpose, like good new growth?"

"I assure you the English have no desire to reimpose anything at all. They want to keep clear of Central Asia. Afghanistan is their barrier. You to the North, we to the South and no interference."

"Oh, but that is not true!" cried the Professor, and a

dozen other voices supported him. We had been leaning against the outer wall of a cell. Below us was a slab upon which a scribe used to sit recording the names and crimes of prisoners who were unlikely to be heard of again, so that his records were, in fact, the death certificates of the living. I had hardly noticed the gradual gathering of uniforms and black blouses, until, in the mutilated confusion of languages that was our usual means of communication, I heard attributed to England every form of interference, ranging from the support of bassmatchi (that generic term covering bandits and White Russians, the Irish of Central Asia, anyone "agin the Government") to the instigation, in the new and still somewhat divided republics, of national, as opposed to Soviet, sentiments.

After a while I could no longer understand what had become an agreeable political argument, but I'd already realised, with a shock compounded of irritation and amusement, that in the autonomous republics north of the Oxus, there is a terror of British Imperialism or British Toryism only equalled by official India's fear of Russia. Just as Delhi attributes the Communism of unemployed, middle-class youth to the influence of Moscow, so the communities depending on Tashkent, which is the administrative centre of Soviet Central Asia, imagine British agency behind any subversive movement. And they arm to meet it in the form of "Red Shirts," devoted—with pistols—to the Brotherhood of Man, or village "Red Sticks," intent on defending the new communal peasants from those old individualistic farmers who have turned bandits. How Alice would have enjoyed herself with this new form of Looking-Glass!

CHAPTER XXXVI

NEW HEAVEN AND NEW EARTH

AFTER we left the Citadel, the day lost any semblance of continuity. It became as haphazard as the bazaars tunnelling in such profusion among the ruined mosques and the lofty new buildings.

Time had outlawed us. It might have been noon, but nobody knew. It didn't matter. There were no queues in front of the shops which sold cotton overalls for seventeen roubles instead of half a crown, or cakes for twice the price of a solid English meal. But there was also no hurry. Everybody seemed willing to wait for endless hours, however unimportant the objective, and nobody showed any resentment at being forced to waste time, so plentiful and unimportant.

We set out with the intention of acquiring a permit to climb the Tower of Death. For reasons which I could not fathom, we were obliged to go first to a library where we inscribed our names and then to the museum where, after being shown some beautiful painted beams, reft from a mosque, that were being packed for despatch to Moscow, we enlisted the help of the curator. While we looked at the ingenious instruments of torture employed by Olim Khan's executioners, he wrote a long letter. With this missive, we left in search of the official who kept the key of the Tower. As we trudged through the quilted dust, I reflected upon how few words the Usbegs use to express appreciation, or gratitude. Whenever I asked any of my Bokharan friends to translate my thanks for the continuous services rendered to me, the answer was always, "I've already said that," or, "It isn't necessary; he doesn't expect

you to be so pleased." Amiable and direct, the Usbegs of my acquaintance wasted time on everything except the involved courtesy habitual among older Moslems.

It seemed to me as we walked that all the vaunted progress of Bokhara might well be exchanged for some means of transport. Feet are quite inadequate.

Heat radiated from the surrounding desert. The clay walls were scorching, as if they had been newly baked. The sunken tanks, hygienically empty, mocked us with a vision of what they used to be when fruit trees grew in the squares. Then silken figures, vastly turbaned, sat upon carpets that were like posies of flowers. They drank tea and smoked water-pipes beside the brimming pools, in a cloud of flies, no doubt, but with beauty of blue tiles above them and a multi-coloured throng pressing in with mules, camels and litters, with scent of spices, music and strange tongues, from Araby, India, and the mountain portals of Mongolia.

To-day, there are no flies, but there is instead the soft and heavy oppression of a city and a life disintegrating. Wherever we walked, it was in the dust and amidst the rubble of earthen buildings crumbling back into the earth. The people themselves seemed to be earth-coloured, for the dust caked upon their hair and lips. Their lids were stiff with it, their lashes friezes of clay. In a few more years the old town will no longer exist. It is as if an earthquake had tumbled into a heap, tombs, houses, rags, bones, itinerant sellers and citizens intent on finding a short cut to the new factories. A few patches of brilliant blue remain on the façades of colleges or the domes of mosques, and wherever I looked up I saw the clamorous red beaks of storks, the black and white stripes of their wings.

"Here we are going to build the largest ginning plant in Usbegistan," said the Professor, pointing to a rubbish heap, and "Here"—in what might have been a quarry—"we shall have schools."

We paused to inspect a silk factory. The manager was

portly and enthusiastic. "The best looms are French," he said, and showed us the name of a Lyons firm on some of the machinery. "But we shall soon make the same thing ourselves."

I saw a room without end, full of shifting colours. Sunshine streamed through the great windows. Women of all ages were occupied with the flying shuttles. One girl held a broken thread in her teeth. There were no veils, but the older workers had heaped their parandjas on the window-sills ready to put on again before they faced the streets. The looms were of all patterns, some of them archaic and worked by hand, but the workers had an air of almost fierce independence and I noticed a woman of sixty slap a quick-fingered girl who would have unravelled some silk for her.

"The factory is not yet two years old," explained the Russian manager, "but already I have 300 workers, earning up to 400 roubles a month. Yes, they are nearly all women. What an escape it is from their homes! At first, they were as frightened of light as of a man and they would scarcely even whisper, one to another. Now, look at them." His voice was proud and some of the workers glanced up at him, laughing.

I saw Jewesses with blue-black hair and shawls printed in many colours and deeply fringed; Usbegs, flat-faced and ruddy, with an embroidered cap, perched above a ruff of plaits; Tadjiks wearing a three-cornered black coiffe, with hair hanging to their waists; and pale Russians with kerchiefs knotted under their chins. I saw a few old men in flowered and wadded coats, acting as messengers, and darkly eager boys whose eyes did more work than their fingers, for the Usbeg hand is clumsy. "Why must I have so many of these fingers," said an imp who had mixed his strands. "I could do better with two thumbs. The others just get in the way."

"At first," explained the manager, "the women came here secretly for fear of being beaten by their husbands, although, of course, it is now illegal for a man to strike his

wife. One girl had her throat cut on the doorstep. It was her father who did it and that roused the women. They tore off their veils and threw them into the street."

We walked on and on, through the changing colours, profligate of reds and purples, blue, orange, green.

"Even now some of the unmarried girls daren't take their wages home. We keep the money here and they claim it when they marry."

"Do they want to work?" I asked, as we looked at striped cotton blanketing, heavy as carpets. I remembered the leisured ease of the mud houses where, for 1,200 years, Moslem women had talked, cooked, and slept, apparently content.

"Every girl in the town wants to come here, and most of the married women as well. They run to the factory instead of to the judge or the priest. This building is a new heaven and a new earth." The manager laughed and showed us stockings with no shape about the legs.

"New plant is coming from Moscow," he said. "Next year I shall have 600 workers."

Bokhara lives in the future. Her past is dead.

From the roof of the factory, on to which I was hoisted by several lusty workers who begged me to be careful not to fall through it as they'd had enough of corpses—result of husbands' or parents' objections—I was able to take a photograph of the Tower of Death. Later, armed with an infinity of documents permitting us to do everything except commit suicide from the top, we climbed it. The circling staircase was built by Arashan Baba Khan in the twelfth century, and as I climbed—for ever and for ever, so it seemed—I lost not only breath, but weight. When at last I emerged, dripping, upon the gallery, I felt I had no further connection with the earth. From this outpost of the sky I looked down upon the calm blue pools that were the domes of mosques, bordered with stretches of reeds that were grass-grown roofs. I watched the meditation of the storks, standing heavily, each upon one red leg, like clumsy artificial flowers uneven on their stems. The

birds were sacred to the Faithful and even the Soviet does not interfere with the litter of their nests.

From above, the Tower does not look so solid. It is a javelin thrust into the heart of the old town, between the gentle little mosque of Kok Gumbash crumbling under the last of its blue tiles and the splendours of those two great buildings, the Chir Arab University, with a swarming market on the pavement in front of it, and the eleventh century Kalan. From the pulpit of the latter, a hundred years later, Genghiz Khan, "the Scourge of God," demanded food for his 150,000 soldiers, and the boxes of the Koran as mangers for his small sturdy horses that had come across the roof of the world.

The Kalan is purest beauty. To the splendour of its design is added the sharp contrast of light and shadow. For behind the yellow and blue of the still grandiose façade, the court, which for the Greater and Lesser Feasts of Islam used to be covered with a blood-red carpet on which merchants and pilgrims, the holy, the learned and the ignorant, in their rich silks or gaily flowered cottons, knelt close together, making the pattern of a many-coloured tapestry—this court, deserted now, is surrounded by an arcade with triple vaults supported on gigantic cubes of pillars. So the cool and dark of the cloisters sharply borders the hot, white blaze of the court.

Beyond this magnificence of building, crowned always by the words of the Koran, "Allah, the all merciful and all compassionate," I could see the narrow streets running blindly between the mud cubes of houses that had been prisons for succeeding generations of women. I could see the domed brick roofs of the bazaars under which, in a medley of languages, every man was selling to his neighbour, a frenzy of selling, books, bread, bracelets, embroidered caps and waistcoats, hats like muffs made of Bokharan hare, teapots and green tea, drinks of violent colours and equally violent effect, charras disguised as snuff, and bitter green tobacco, camel's flesh, horse flesh and mutton, plov, such plov, great round-bellied saucepans full of it, with the rich,

fat rice oozing over the sides; marriage beds with scarlet painted posts; ices made from camels' milk; bells, sweetmeats and harness with tassels dripping like ripe oranges. Such bazaars! The murmur of their buying and selling rose like the drone of a hive. From the summit of Death's Tower I could hear the different tones of voices, the cries, the laughter, the clatter of diminutive donkey hoofs, the grumbling and the satisfaction, all the thousand sounds that make up the life of a city, but strangely emphasised and separated as if the clarity of the air and the distance acted as a filter.

For some time the Professor had been silent. He had hardly answered my questions and it was evident that he was considering a matter of moment. "I am hungry," he said at last.

"So am I."

"Shall we eat plov?"

My mouth watered and no doubt ecstasy embellished my moist and dusty appearance.

Hurriedly, the Professor completed his duty by pointing out the mosques and minarets of modern Bokhara in the shape of the new theatre, the new institute, the new university, the new parks, houses, schools, clubs, and those new spaces where until the successful revolution of 1920, the eleven gates of the city were barred at night. Now they are always open.

Then, without waiting for the praise due to these symbols of Asia changed and still changing so rapidly that Europe may find it hard one day to keep pace, he hurried down the stairs. At the bottom, we paused to drink a sweet, warm and petunia-coloured liquid, offered by an Armenian. And as is habitual in Asia, our haste was stemmed by conversation. Perhaps Europe will still have breathing-space before she is called upon to face that last great invasion which Delhi imagines will be Slav, and Russia, Japanese!

CHAPTER XXXVII

DELUSION AMONG THE COOKS

EVENTUALLY the three of us set out for the street of cooks, where the smell alone was a meal. Here on raised platforms men in skull-caps and greasy robes, the colours blurred, beat a tattoo upon their saucepans and their cauldrons crying out the succulence of their wares.

But alas, no plov was ready. "For," explained the first expert to whom we addressed ourselves, "how can I cook sweet mare's flesh and rice, with currants and spices and all else that you wish until I know how many people will eat it?"

"Can you not make for three?" begged the Professor, while I poked him firmly in the ribs and said, "Mutton, not horse."

Dust caked my throat and turned my voice into a raucous whisper.

"Eh—what?" asked the Professor.

"Sheep," I repeated, "he must make it of sheep."

"Mutton is very expensive," protested the Professor, but he evidently consulted the purveyor of plov, for the greasy man turned and glared at me. Words rushed from him. "He says the mare died of a very healthy disease," translated the Professor with some bewilderment. "And it does not matter anyhow, for he will not make for less than six. Come with me. We must find eaters."

The Armenian had already button-holed a peasant who looked as if he could eat a sheep at a sitting but, having pinched his large stomach, he said it was too early. Plov tasted better at night.

After walking the length of the street, we found a wizened scrap of a cook who agreed to make mutton plov "with a sheep so young that it would melt like the sin of

the True Believer when his tongue tasted alcohol," but he could not possibly waste so rare a delicacy upon less than eight people.

We mustered five, including an Afghan exile who spoke Persian and a Cossack from the Caucasus whose Circassian mother had taught him Arabic, but the cook could not be persuaded. "It is greed, not hunger, that would make you eat before the sun sinks. Come back with the night and I will make you a poem"—he gestured beautifully with fingers petal-smooth—"a delight, a sin——" We left him still describing the plov and went in surly silence through the bazaar.

"Truly, it *is* early," said the Professor.

"Four o'clock at least," I said.

The five of us were still together, for the Professor, who loved company, could not bear to disperse the little gathering. It evidently appealed both to his gregarious Usbeg nature and to that more intensive friendliness which Sovietisation induces in simple natures. "We will go to my house and drink tea," he said.

The suggestion delighted me, for I could not believe that we should be expected to drink in a vertical position and I longed for nothing more than to sit down. I calculated that altogether I had been walking and talking, without other respite than the pause in the school, for between 7 and 9 hours.

Clustering together so that we might miss no opportunity for conversation, we shambled through ancient yards. We made a short cut by way of a baker's attic over acres of roof, through which the Cossack on two occasions stuck a high-heeled boot. We twisted in and out of labyrinthine alleys with the doorways of primeval Asia leading into mud courts where we had a glimpse of women, unveiled, in crude reds and yellows. At last, when I knew I couldn't force my feet further, when I was beginning to feel not only full of dust but completely nourished by it, the Professor pushed open a wooden door which leaned giddily from its hinges.

Following him, we passed through the L-shaped passage that protects the privacy of Moslem houses and debouched into a pleasant mud court with an empty tank in the middle. Beside a willow some wooden couches were spread with rugs. The Armenian put down his tray and the barrel that had contained the petunia liquid. His shirt hung in striped folds outside his trousers. Its exuberance was only partially confined by a magnificent belt embroidered and studded with metal. The Cossack was wearing a hat made of a well-grown sheep which he had bought from a Turkoman for a blade with a flaw in it. He was delighted about that flaw. He had already recounted the story three times and now he began it again, seated on the corner of the couch with his legs spread wide.

After a while a girl came out of the house, walking with legs well apart in high-heeled shoes. She may have been fifteen and she wore a checked red print with a muslin collar. Her hair was cut straight across the back of her neck and the ends turned up like a mallard's tail. Her bare arms were sunburned and her head sleek. She might have come out of any Balkan café.

On a tray covered with coarse lace, she brought tea, glasses of milk and eggs boiled hard. At sight of her, the Professor relaxed. "What has she brought? Tortoise eggs for certain. They are too small for hens. And are you sure this is not asses' milk, or maybe a sheep's?" Brother and sister laughed at each other. "They will tell you we Usbegs are lazy and treacherous too, and the Kazaks of course are fools, for they pad themselves with half a dozen coats in summer and go bare-chested in winter and the Tadjiks are dirty and the Khirgiz savage! Oh, it's only the Russians that are any good!" And he slapped the large Cossack across the shoulders, upon which everyone roared with laughter.

The sound brought an old-fashioned figure to the door of the house. "Father, come here and talk with us," shouted the Professor. Slowly, the old man advanced. He was a typical peasant with knee-boots and a long coat

striped like a wasp. He talked of the country markets. On Monday he had been to such a one and on Tuesday to another.

"What does he buy?" I asked. "Nothing," replied the son, "but to miss a market would deprive him of a chance to talk and to eat shashlik at midday and a great deal of plov at night."

The girl broke in and with amusement they told how their father would drive fifteen miles in his high-wheeled cart to buy half a pound of green tobacco at a village fair because the purchase would include sitting for hours with his friends in the tea-houses, listening to the scandal of the kishlaks, watching a bird-fight, hearing the music of dutar and drum, the heartbreaking songs of old heroic days, and discussing the prices of everything from a melon, pickled at this season, to a camel, while sucking the outrageously hot dumplings called Pelmeny, whose recipe belonged to the cooks of Chinese Turkestan. The market was life, colour, excitement and society combined.

"D'you ever go?" I asked the young people.

"Oh no," they said in unison. "We work."

I noticed that they treated their father with good-natured tolerance, but they did not offer him the best seat, or pay him any of the respectful attentions which a Moslem parent would expect from his children. And the old man evidently regarded son and daughter with a certain amount of awe. He felt they must be propitiated as the representatives of a new order, stronger than his own. They had the power. He must keep on good terms with them.

After a while I went into the house. The outer room was furnished with chairs and a gramophone upon a painted chest. A primus and a regiment of teapots stood upon the table. On the walls hung a yak's tail, a red banner with the device of a club on it, a picture of Lenin and some fly-blown mirrors, also a crudely-printed poster offering a reward for the capture of a famous bandit.

The inner room, hidden behind a clay screen, was as it had always been since the house was built. Sunk in the

middle of the floor was a square hole in which charcoal simmered. When it grew cold, the family would sit round this hearth with their feet hanging over the edge. In winter their mattresses were ranged above it on wooden stretchers. In summer it was covered by a table, a few inches high.

When I came into the dimness of this immemorial room, I could, at first, see nothing, for the light came from narrow apertures under the roof. Then I made out a woman crouched upon a mat, doing nothing. Dark eyes had burned holes in the parchment of her face. A parandja hung from her head, thrown back so that it showed the straight striped dress cut like a Victorian nightgown.

On the wall hung the unfinished carpet, which a bride must always bring to her new home as evidence of her industry, but it is only completed after her death.

There was no furniture except a pile of the wadded quilts on which, presumably, the whole family slept, some hard pillows covered with cotton slips and three chests containing the women's clothes.

The girl with the bobbed hair came in and leaned against the screen, a bright splash of colour, with strong teeth and an expression of obtuse cheerfulness. She treated her mother with kindness, amusement and a mild scorn, supplying her with melon seeds to crack between decayed black teeth and a pinch of green tobacco to hold under the tongue.

Between them were all the centuries in which women have been veiled and wasted, the generations of subservience and disease, the premature and tragically recurrent births, the ignorant deaths, outcome of polygamy and slavery. Between them, in actual fact, were less than seventeen years. For the woman seated on the floor, grey, worn, obese and inert, with admirable manners and no ideas, was barely thirty-two. But she had been the third wife, of negligible family, disliked by the other two because of their husband's preference which had caused

her to bear eleven children, of whom the first eight had died at birth.

"You must go and see my sisters," said Karima of the red frock. "They have fine new houses, not like this. One is married to an engineer and the other to an official in the cotton co-operative." The old woman of thirty-two signed to me to sit beside her. She fingered my rough tweed. "Have you children?" she asked, and her daughter translated. "Do they also work? Have they got Moscow?"

"She thinks Moscow's a disease," explained the girl.

CHAPTER XXXVIII

IN SEARCH OF THE CHOR MINOR

THE following day I went to see the daughter who had married into another century. I found her in a jerry-built house, divided between four families. Everything was unfinished and as if in revolt against the secretive mud walls which, for a thousand years or so, had suppressed the lives of preceding generations, there was neither privacy nor reticence. The staircase smelt of the least attractive human habits. A radiator had been left on the landing and there one imagined it would stand, without purpose, until somebody knocked it over and the cheap metal broke.

A door without lock or bolt led to the two rooms occupied by Selima and her husband. They were light and airy, very bare and coated with dust because the windows didn't fit the frames. In the sitting-room a girl in a print overall, with flesh-coloured cotton stockings and high-heeled shoes, was seated on the floor. She held a pencil between admirable teeth and she was frowning over an exercise book. Her hair hung in a number of short plaits, caught with a brooch at the nape, and there was a great deal of powder on her nose.

Selima spoke Russian and Usbeg, and was learning German. She had never worn the veil and she had chosen her own husband. Her baby, instead of being strapped to a board for the first year of his life, to the detriment of health and shape and to the ruin of his internal organs, was crowing on the floor. He was large, fat and determined, and he certainly belonged to the new order, for he gazed ecstatically at the loud-speaker which emitted facts and figures concerning electrification at Vaksh Stroi.

"Are you interested? Do you listen?" I asked the girl.

"Listen to what? The wireless? Oh that!" She turned to the instrument as if to be quite sure it was there. Then she said: "I'm used to it."

"But *do* you listen?"

"Why should I? It is always talking."

"You don't mind the noise?"

Selima looked puzzled, for the loud-speaker was part of her life, that life to which noise and a certain amount of movement had been admitted and from which individual thought had been excluded.

I also sat upon the floor, although there were several chairs. On the table, as usual, stood a primus. An electric light hung from the ceiling, but there was no current. With difficulty, Selima and I conversed. She wanted a lot of children, but her husband thought she ought to work. It was a duty. It was also modern. She might just as well have said "fashionable." She didn't believe in Islam. Religion could not be more out of date. But Lenin she supposed to be a prophet and the successor of Mohammed. Twice she exclaimed: "If Allah wills!" and changed it to: "Please Lenin!"

Selima did gymnastics every morning and went to the cinema with her husband whenever there was a new film. She looked immensely strong and she had an amusing smile. It stopped short of her eyes which were brown and grave. She didn't like cooking. Her most cherished possession was a tin-opener. She became ecstatic when she talked of the potted, canned and bottled food which, on festive occasions, she bought from the Gastronomical Co-operative.

Selima's husband earned the equivalent of £6 a month and they took lodgers, for what could they do with two rooms all to themselves? I had noticed what seemed to be a superfluity of beds, and traces of divergent personalities in the way of clothing and possessions, but before I could ask how half a dozen of them managed in so small a space, one of the lodgers came in. He was a Tadjik lorry-driver,

good-looking and a stranger to Bokhara. He had just got a job with a cotton-truck and didn't think much of the town. Selima hoisted herself on to a chair, from which she regarded her feet as strangers with uncertain habits. With her eyes on the carpet whose brilliant chemical dyes were already smudged, she translated from Tadjik, which is derived from ancient Persian, into a jumble of Russian and German. "Mechanics here have a good time," she said. "There are so few of them. They can do what they like. Nobody dares to argue with them."

The lorry-driver laughed. "I could get a dozen jobs and there'd be as many more waiting for me," he said.

Selima poured stale tea out of a samovar, and the Tadjik added sugar from his pocket. I was taken to wash my hands in the public basin on the landing. It had no plug, because Russia follows the Asian custom of pouring clean water from tap or ewer over already soaped hands. The lavatory was a cubicle opening out of the unused public kitchen. There was no bath. Every five days Selima went to the Turkish baths, where she boiled herself and her clothes in a lovely atmosphere of steam, sweat and gossip.

After a while, the Tadjik offered to take me home, but I wanted to see the Chor Minor, loveliest of Bokharan mosques. I had an old photograph of the building, with its dome and four minarets reflected in one of the chaus * which had been drained at the bidding of hygiene. I showed it to Selima but even looking at it upside down evoked no sense of familiarity. "It is no longer here," she said with decision. "The old things are falling fast. They are no use and we need space for factories and plant." It is curious how even the slow Usbeg tongue becomes eloquent on the subject of industrialisation. Selima would have continued to talk after the fashion of a shock-worker on the wireless, had I not enlisted the sympathies of the Tadjik. Together, we set out to find the Chor Minor.

It was then between four and five, and the heat had

* Public tanks.

slightly abated, but a haze of dust hung over the alleys of the old town. Between crumbling walls, we shuffled without other sound than the sentences each of us slowly enunciated in the vain hope that the other would understand. We had in common, perhaps, some twenty words of Persian, and a few Usbeg nouns. With these we carried on a surprising conversation. It was emphasised by pantomimic gestures and illustrations drawn in the dust. Heaven alone knows to what I assented because my companion preferred "yes" to "no" as a comment. Eventually, my affirmatives became mere punctuations of a narrative which I took to be the story of his life. He seemed to have done a good deal of fighting and to have been wounded several times, for he indicated the scars scattered about his person and he referred to hiding in the mountains, but whether from whites or reds I could not tell, because I knew no way of translating the former noun. I did learn, however, that he was a nationalist with stronger feelings about an independent Tadjikistan than about a united Soviet Asia.

When we came to the bazaars, tunnelling, deliciously dark and cool, between a series of domed spaces, that served as cross-roads, I insisted on asking for directions. We showed the photograph to a baker who sat, bare-legged, in a night-shirt with an ornate skull-cap on his head, among pillars of bread. He studied it from all angles before he said: "Yes, yes, but now there are only three."

It disturbed me to think that one of the four slender minarets had fallen, but I insisted that I must see what remained. The baker seemed surprised, but he obligingly extracted himself from the intricate arrangement of breads, thrust his feet into heel-less slippers with half-moon toes, and beckoned us to follow him. The Tadjik took my arm and laughed. We hurried through a number of dim markets, where there was slow and difficult bargaining, but no frenzy of selling, and indeed no obvious interest in the wares displayed, before diving into a cook-shop.

Here we became involved in argument with a hirsute personage redolent of meat. The photograph was displayed. It passed from hand to hand, generally upside down. I heard the word "lak-lak"* and was reassured, for the picture showed a stork's nest at the top of each minaret.

Voices grew louder. Lethargic spectators swelled in from the bazaar. At the height of the discussion, the cook gathered his drenched white garments round him and scurried up a stair in the wall. The baker seized my hand and pulled me after him. When I hesitated, the Tadjik pushed from behind. It was dark in the thickness of the old wall, and when the baker paused, I bumped into the back of the cook which smelled strongly of his calling. Three pairs of hands forced me through a hole and, in the wake of bare legs, I tumbled out upon a roof.

The mud and chopped straw sagged under our hurrying steps and as we climbed a low wall, the Tadjik's foot went through into a room below. We heard a cry and a rush of falling material, but while I gaped, the others exerted all their strength and my friend was rescued from the ignominy of dropping uninvited on to a strange bed, or among the coffee pots of a forbidden hearth.

We crossed acres of roof and scrambled over innumerable walls before the cook seized my shoulder and swung me round a dome erupting like a vast earthen bubble. With the delight of a child presenting to a cherished elder a present that he has made himself, he exclaimed: "Lak-lak three. The fourth went last year."

There in front of us, untidily ranged upon a tanner's roof, were three storks' nests. In one of them, stood a surprised bird, its beak opening to protest.

My twenty words of Persian left me. In English, I referred to the fame of the Chor Minor. I pointed to the minarets. I drew designs upon the yielding roof. I went through the motions of walking with the photograph held in front of me, and acted the delight I would feel when at last—if ever—I reached the fabulous mosque.

* Stork.

With smiles wiped from their faces, baker and cook consulted. They had never heard of the Chor Minor. It was one of the "old things" that no longer existed. Gloom descended on them and the bitterness of failure. For the Usbeg, simple, stolid, obstinate, greedy, with a facile good humour and a sensuous appreciation of all the easy pleasures upon which he ruminates like a cow, without imagination and with few fixed principles except a determination to avoid or evade interference, enjoys giving what another person wants, providing the gift costs only his time.

But the Tadjik had the instincts of a hunter. Without ceremony, he seized the photograph in one hand and as much of me as he could get hold of in the other. Our recent allies were left arguing upon the roof. The "lak-lak" drifted after us, as we clambered down a broken wall. A loose brick gave and I fell in a heap in the dust. My companion picked me up and shook me. Speech flowed from him and I gathered that he was surprised but relieved, to understand, at last, my objective.

We walked a long way between walls that never ended and never changed. Dust lay as thick as sand in the desert, but it was rather pleasant, for the shadows had lengthened and the evening light turned all the mud into gold. The air was soft with gold-dust and through broken doorways we had glimpses of colour—the raw reds and blues of the older women's clothes and an occasional froth of blossom.

We asked a great many people for advice and they all told us to go different ways, until, on the steps of a fallen mosque, we found an old man smoking a water-pipe. His turban was as startling as Cinderella's pumpkin and his torn coats layered one on top of another.

"There is a Mullah," I said. "Ask him!"

The Tadjik protested. Instinctively, he felt it would be illogical to ask information of a person representing so clearly the past and a host of inhibitions as well. But the learned man spoke to me in Arabic and he knew all about the Chor Minor.

Following his directions, we came to a lane sunk like a trench. The end of it was blocked by a lorry and behind this symbol of the twentieth century, flowered one of the delicate blue gateways created by artists with leisure instead of speed at their command.

We circumvented the lorry and passed through a lovely arch with verses of the Koran inscribed among the mosaics. In the middle of the court, unkempt now and piled with refuse, lay an empty chau. But behind it, the mosque rose magnificent. The sun was sinking and the four minarets, "lances thrust hilt-deep into the earth," or "tapers reared towards heaven," according to the imagination of the onlooker, were outlined against luminous gold. The blue that remained to them was faded and coated with dust and the storks' nests spoiled their proportions, but in the tender light, the building looked remote and mellow. It held history and legend instead of commercial prospects.

So I thought until out of the open door, from which foamed a mass of something brown and soft, there came running a delicious figure, gargantuanly booted, with a mass of coats scarcely restrained by the belt. Uttering chuckles of delight, the figure flung itself upon my Tadjik and kissed him on both cheeks. After which the two men held each at arm's length while they reiterated their delight at the unexpected meeting. For the mightily-booted one belonged to the same village as my friend. Both were exiles in a strange city.

After much explanation, in which, it seemed, I was included, each took one of my arms and thus, in friendly fashion, we waded through the tide of dirty cotton that poured out of the Chor Minor. For the mosque had become a warehouse. When we stood on the threshold, with the iwan* soaring above us, we could see little but the roughened brown fluff that represented last year's harvest. The prayer-niche was buried in it. The pulpit had disappeared. High up on the walls, I could distinguish a few inscriptions from the Hadith (Sayings of the Prophet

* The entrance arch.

Mohammed) and when a couple of peasants with sacks over their shoulders, passed us, the superintendent muttered a Moslem greeting. It seemed to me that he poised uncertain between two stages of existence. The words of Faith came easily to his lips and he made us climb on to the roof and walk along the crumbling walls so that we could trace the plan of the mosque and its accompanying schools. But he saw the future in terms of cotton and his voice grew eager as he spoke of it.

We sat beside the chau, with our legs hanging over the edge, and inevitably, I began to think of food. But, not until we were all three walking in the sandy lane, did my companions mention plov. Then the word came negligently from the first Tadjik and with it a suggestion which I didn't understand, but to which I answered "yes." It would not be wise, I thought, to postpone the possibility of food by questions.

The second Tadjik evidently had a better idea. He put it to me with enthusiasm. Once more I agreed, and so pleased were my companions that they hurried through the dusk with smiles spread across their faces. I gathered that we must—and would—find a "phaetōn," pronounced with the accent on the last syllable, and with this purpose we walked, when we did not run, through a maze of alleys, questioning the passers-by as to whether they had seen any means of transport. Nearly all of them said there had been a phaetōn at some previous moment and we pursued this mythical vehicle with a zeal that left me breathless. Eventually we met an "arba," one of those high-wheeled carts, with the driver perched between the shafts on a fragment of saddle above the horse's back.

Both Tadjiks argued, persuaded, promised. The driver could not have been more unwilling, but we all got into the cart and in the dusk, heavy and rich as a mantle embroidered with firelight and stars, we lurched out of the town. The great wheels turned slowly, their axles level with the floor, and through them, as I sat upon the boards, I could see segments of mud houses, fallen walls and

rubbish heaps—then the plain and the warm sweet smell of dung.

I hadn't the faintest idea where we were going, but the creak of the wheels made a song and the immensity of space was agreeable.

I'd had the same feeling of detachment on the Steppes of Afghanistan and here the emotion was heightened by my inability to understand more than a fraction of what my companions said. I felt completely adrift and nothing could have been more satisfactory, for I had neither responsibilities nor purpose. To my delight I realised that I was without intentions. My hunger had abated. I didn't care what happened.

I think I went to sleep.

It seemed to me that the creaking was in my bones and the jolting of the cart my own instinctive movement before both ceased and with the Tadjiks I descended ungracefully into mud. Blinking, I saw the thicker darkness of houses, but they were blind and mute. Not a sound in what must have been a village street! Rural Usbegistan had evidently not yet discarded the habit of privacy, superfluous to the new generation in the towns.

Blundering over hillocks and into potholes, we came to the end of the mud. Grass spread under our feet and in front of us there rose a succession of humps. Some of them were camels. But the larger ones turned out to be yurts. Before I knew what had happened, I found myself thrust under a goat's hair curtain. Both Tadjiks followed and there was a great deal of explanation, but the family seated round a smoking hearth shewed little surprise. They made room for us on a felt rug, and a woman in a red dress with a pad of cloth folded over her head gave me a drink of sour milk. Mutton was cooking in a three-legged pot. The smell of it made my mouth water and the acrid smoke brought tears to my eyes.

Two girls crept up to me and began to feel my tweed. They thrust their hands into my pockets, undid my shoe-laces and took off my hat. Then they settled beside me

and asked questions. Had I a husband, had I sons. Where was I going?

I understood one word in ten and strung together copybook answers, to the amusement of the whole gathering who treated me as an agreeable joke. My companions doubtless explained my origin and, gradually, I deduced that the second Tadjik was in some way related to the nomad family who had come slowly with their beasts from the mountains near Tashkent, drawn by the news of wealth to be had for the price of labour.

They were a freer and more cheerful people than I had yet met. They showed none of the Usbeg suspicion, nor were they distrustful of new conditions. Government to them was a myth. They considered it best to avoid direct contact with anything so incomprehensible, but if cotton were more profitable than camel-breeding, why not make the most of it? Those nomad Tadjiks seemed to me adaptable and alert. They were still Moslems, for while the pot was on the fire, the oldest man shambled to his feet and went out. A couple of youths followed him and under the flap I could see them praying, but they made no preparatory ablutions, nor did they trouble to face the East.

It was hot in the smoke-filled tent and my eyes were so sore that I could hardly distinguish the figures humped against the felt-covered walls. Through a hole at the top, which could be closed by a draw-string, I saw the sky and a star swimming in smoke, but when I had drunk a good deal of "koumiss," fomented mare's milk, my head went round. I did not know whether I was asleep or awake.

The plov was excellent. A boy produced a long-handled instrument and played something infinitely sad. The company seemed to enjoy it, for sorrow is meat and drink to the nomad. Without it, he could not be happy. In sorrow, he finds relaxation and a subtle companionship with nature. It is the shadow which accentuates the value of the high-lights. It is not lasting. There is always an

end. And joy also is made more poignant by the certainty that it is ephemeral.

To the murmur of an old, heroic song, I went to sleep, my head on a leather-covered pillow. The girls lay flat on their faces beside me. Somebody drew over us a piece of embroidered felt and a leather coat lined with fleece.

Hours later I woke. Raising myself cautiously on one arm, I looked round the yurt. Moonlight poured through a lifted flap. The reed walls were lined with strips of bright coloured material, hand woven. These reached some four feet from the ground. Above them hung various domestic objects. Clothing, saddlery and weapons were piled in different places. There were also bales of felt and cheap cotton stuffs, knee-boots, a dead bird that looked like an eagle, a broken stove, a lamp without a chimney, some cheap hardware and crockery, and a row of narrow-necked leather vessels, presumably containing koumiss. On the earth, which was covered with a number of rugs, lay at least a dozen people, fully clothed, one man with a hat made of a whole fox crammed down over his ears, the others with skull caps still in place.

A few ashes glowed on the hearth. Near it a couple made love. Their movements shaped the leather blanket, but no sound came from them. The father of the family snored. He lay on his back and the breath caught in his nose. It seemed that he would choke, but each raucous boom relieved him and all the while a star hung in the aperture at the top of the yurt I thought of it as a drop of crystal. It would fall straight on to the trumpeting, tormented nose.

CHAPTER XXXIX

CONVERSATION UNDER A TRACTOR

EARLY one morning I drove in the ghost of a phaeton, drawn by a skeleton horse, through the indeterminate streets of Bokhara. With me, curiously enough, were four people whose speech I understood. They were a Greek baker who talked bad French, a Hindu metal-worker, a Georgian carpenter who sold soft drinks and ices made of camels' milk, and a Persian said to be a doctor.

Our purpose was to visit the palace and country estate of the last Emir, Olim Khan, which has been turned into a cotton farm, but the horse had no intention of going so far. By this time, I had realised that though a small percentage of shockworkers can increase the output in a factory, nothing short of an earthquake would hurry the pace of daily life which is that of feet not of machinery. As far as a man can walk and as quickly—so Bokhara moves.

Dreamily, I regarded the old town where Imams studied for twenty years before they were allowed to preach. I watched a donkey, the suitcase of Central Asia, ruffle the dust with slow, delicate feet and I noticed his saddle-bags covered with fine Tekinski carpet. I knew I ought to get out and bargain for them, but the five of us were so closely wedged that no one could move without a general upheaval. So I turned my attention to the fragmentary façades, most of them dating from the 15th or 17th centuries. I tried to go back further to the golden age of Bokhara, a thousand years ago. I imagined scribes in striped robes seated on the steps of the mosques, shewing patterns of handwriting, their papers weighted with teapots as in Mazar-i-Sherif. The dust-coated pedestrians ate sunflower seeds or dried grapes as they shuffled past and in my mind I turned them

into riders on two-humped Bactrian camels, with incense-burners under their coats of many colours. I even allowed them to hold pomanders to their nostrils, for my companions smelled strongly of diverse and unpleasant things.

A perfect arch reared above the flat roofs and I remembered the embroidered felts in the yurt where I had spent a night with my Tadjik friends. The Mongol nomad, settling in a town, would naturally apply the same principles to decorative architecture. So the mosques, colleges and the courts of private houses reproduce in their mosaics the designs and ideas familiar among the huts where women still embroider with rich colours and complicated stitches.

Behind us the Tower of Death stormed arrogantly into the sky. The domes of the bazaars were like coarse shelled turtles splayed on flat beaches.

"Bokhara," recapitulated the Georgian, "was an oasis in the terrible desert. It was the city of fifty bazaars, of a hundred and fifty mosques, of a hundred and fifty thousand people——"

The Hindu interrupted. "If you had come a few months later you would have found the 'desert' white with cotton——"

"Yet Bokhara is the least modern of the Soviet Central Asian towns——" The Persian was a student of psychology. His interruption was apposite and inevitable. He said, "Religion is still a force here and in their hearts the people still crave for feudalism. They prefer hope to certainty and adventure to the dull and even way of civilisation. Far more life than you imagine is withdrawn behind the walls of the old town. Bokhara is still watchful and resentful, while Samarkand is indifferent and Tashkent frankly commercial."

The Georgian was a strong nationalist as is the way of those who belong to small countries. He said, "In Usbegistan there is a sharp division between patriot and Bolshevic. The Russians represent only a fifth of the population. The best of them are shockworkers who have

drifted into a "backward area" in order to increase production. The others are exiles, or illicit traders, or bourgeois who want to qualify as workmen and members of a Trade Union. The heads of the G.P.U., of the Trusts and Corporations and most of the Party officers are Russian. But teaching and official correspondence are in Usbeg, and the President, Faisullah Khodshayer, a strong nationalist yet one of the seven members of the Central Executive Committee of the U.S.S.R., is said to defy Moscow with impunity."

"A curious situation," reflected the Persian. "At the moment, since the Usbeg brain is slow, four men are doing the work of one, but they are all so happy to be in an office that they don't care what happens so long as the supply of ink and paper lasts."

While the horse ceased all pretence of movement and, deaf to the driver's passion, sank hopelessly into the dust, I learned that the original Party members, enrolled during the period when hard-pressed nationalists turned to the Soviet for arms, were most of them illiterate, but that seventy per cent. of the younger generation were "schooling or schooled."

"And now what are they going to do?" I asked.

"Work," retorted the Persian and being a cynic, he added, "Have you not observed that work is the greatest possible sensation in the Soviet Republics. It has swept all other news from the front pages of our newspapers and it is the sole topic on which everyone has something to say."

Behind us, a truck hooted. Its driver shouted and it then occurred to us that not only had we been stationary for some time, but that we were blocking the lane. After considerable discussion, during which we contrived to disengage ourselves from the phaeton, a dozen pairs of hands seized horse and vehicle and lifted them out of the way. As many others pulled us into the truck and away we went, this time with more chance of reaching our destination.

Four or five miles from the town we came to a new and

splendid gate blazing with mosaics and set in an interminable wall. Outside were a number of lorries and inside the remains of a garden. The palace itself was shocking, for it combined the decorative sins of the late nineteenth century with the disastrous additions of a post-impressionist proletarianism. Banners, posters and busts spoiled the light and airy fantasy of the hall of mirrors. The plaster ornaments shewed consistent conflict between East and West and the gaudiness of the original conception was further emphasized by tattered red bunting and a profusion of slogans.

In haste, we left the building, where the finely proportioned lower rooms seemed to be unoccupied, and went out into the fields. Men and women were working together. More often, it seemed to me, they were drinking tea from a samovar in a carefully sheltered ditch.

It was the season of ploughing and the giant furrows ran to the horizon. Where the land rose, they went beyond it and the earth became a disc made of corrugated, brown cardboard. Scattered over the ribbed expanse were tractors. Like clumsy grey beetles, they moved each at the end of a furrow to which they seemed to be attached as spiders to the threads they weave out of their own vitals. One of the beetles was on its side. Several made more noise than progress.

The superintendent, lean, young and anxious, with hollows under his cheek-bones and grooves between his brows, explained. "The workers enjoy machinery, but they don't understand it. Russians and Usbegs alike, they were brought up to look after animals and they did it well, but they haven't yet developed the sort of minds which can look after a machine. The older ones can't get it out of their heads that a tractor is some kind of beast. The younger are impatient——"

I left the Hindu asking about wages—approximately £6 a month—and the Persian putting two-edged questions that only a philosopher could have answered.

The fallen tractor drew me across acres of mud. It lay

peacefully on its side and in its shadow reposed as quietly a young man in stained overalls. My approach did not disturb him, but the same cannot be said for my appearance. For when I insisted on being noticed, he rolled on to one elbow, stared, blinked, shut his eyes tight and said in excellent German, "I knew something like you would happen, but it was worth it."

"What?"

"The vodka, of course. I've never tasted better."

It took some time to convince him that I was in no way connected with a recent orgy. Perhaps the size and solidity of my foot in a golfing brogue contributed to his final conversion. Still recumbent, he gazed up at me and said, "Well, what do you want then?"

"To talk," I said and without waiting to be discouraged, I told him of my frantic efforts to converse in languages that I didn't know.

Slowly, the young man responded. He had blue eyes and a shock of lint-coloured hair, but he would have been the better for washing and sleep. He said, however, that he could only talk when he was at his worst and on this basis, with his shoulders propped against an upturned wheel, he shared ideas, disconnected and inconsequential, but enchanting to me after the mixture of information and words with which the previous weeks had been surfeited. "I am only half a Russian," he said. "Yes, my mother was German, so if I find it difficult to believe in myself (which is one of the few Slavonic virtues) I can quite easily believe in anything else—you, for instance."

When he smiled, I lost all contact with reality. In spite of the mud with which I was much spattered, I began to wonder if I were really sitting under a tractor in Usbegistan, or—more suitably—leaning across a café table in Vienna watching a student make patterns out of a heap of words.

"You will have noticed," said my companion, settling his hip in a furrow, "that we Russians never finish anything. Yes, for the moment I am Russian. For us there

is no present, only the past, immeasurably terrible, and the future, brilliant beyond conception. We assume, you see, that a building is finished as soon as it is begun and we are impressing our characteristics on the Usbegs. Hence the state of suspended animation which you observe in Bokhara. The population is increasing every month, and since no form of construction is ever completed, the result suggests an interrupted earthquake. Promising, but unsatisfactory, what d'you think?"

I could not think. For I'd become accustomed to words of at most two syllables enunciated with earnest violence, and this rush of ideas left me breathless. During a pause, I asked, "What are you doing here? Do you like it? Are you happy?"

And the young man answered gravely, "We are a fantastic race—yes, yes, I'm still Russian. We can give up anything, even a woman, for we could not be more unpossessive. The revolution, you know, didn't really hurt us at all. We'd had too much. In Imperial Russia there was unbelievable luxury—I can just remember it—and no comfort at all." When he opened his eyes fully, I saw how tired they were. He couldn't be so young after all. "There was extravagance such as it is hard now to imagine. We spent money for nothing. We threw it away and got nothing at all in return." His voice became dreamy. "I suppose that's it. We had so much that we couldn't possibly mind losing it." Another pause. "We start fifteen per cent. ahead of you because we're not afraid of misfortune, sorrow, terror. We don't even consider pain."

I interrupted. "Don't you consider happiness?"

With his eyes shut, the man who was not really so young meditated aloud. "We find happiness in the extent of our power to feel. Our gloom is a corridor, out of which we know we shall emerge. Yours is a dead end. You are so frightened of feeling, you cannot appreciate either joy or sorrow. You will not be unhappy, not even for a day or an hour, so you rob yourselves of the delights of contrast.

What good use the Chinese painters make of black! Without shadow there is no value in colour."

At some point in this fantastic conversation, I asked the man who really wasn't young at all why he lay in the mud and did nothing. He replied, "I think better when I am recumbent."

"Did you come to Usbegistan to think?"

"No. That was the German side of me. It wanted to qualify as a mechanic and subsequently as a particle of the body corporate in the shape of this hideously uncomfortable but not more wasteful, this new but not at all final Russia."

I suppose I also asked such futile things as if he enjoyed being a tractor driver, for he said, "But of course I am happy—and also unhappy. Thank God, however, I am not content. That is the nearest you English get to joy. I remember, so long ago, when I was twenty and the world, though full of cracks, had not yet burst, I asked about a woman at your Embassy, 'Is she happy?' and I remember also the horrible answer, 'In any case, she is satisfied.'"

Uncomfortably, I shifted in the mud and from a pocket full of oddments, the man, who was just thirty-nine, produced some loose black cigarettes. "Try one," he said. "They are, at least, intense," and then, "We Russians are really more fortunate than you, for if our houses are now empty, our minds are beautifully furnished——"

"The furniture must be uncomfortable, for none of you can bear to be alone."

"That is the first intelligent remark you have made," said the man in an even voice.

Feeling extraordinarily inadequate, in spite of the consciousness of being cleaner and more sober than my chance companion, I protested.

"But as a race, you are not sensible. Come now, you ask the wrong things of everyone, tolerance from Germany, patience from France, honesty from Russia and heaven alone knows what you ask from a distraught India—your newspapers are too biased. But as human beings, you are just

as illogical." With mockery on his lips and exhaustion in his eyes, he concluded, "You ask that your husbands should be lovers and your lovers husbands! What more of folly could there be!"

After that I could only say, "Do you know England?"

"Not at all!" replied the surprising man. "And I find it a great advantage. One can so easily be blinded by experience."

He continued to talk while subsiding deeper into the mud. When I left him, still talking, he had contrived to make a pillow of the clay which covered part of the tractor wheel. The rising wind was fast making a blanket for him out of the loose earth. I wondered how soon, or if ever, somebody would enquire about the condition of the machine and its driver. Then I remembered that "there are no hours in the desert."

CHAPTER XL

DIFFICULTIES OF LEAVING BOKHARA

INEVITABLY, I must leave Bokhara. I had put off the decision as long as possible because it was obvious that I should have to make a supreme effort in order to leave at all. "For," said my various friends, students, mechanics, tradesmen and adventurers, "there is no means of transport to Kagan,* unless you sit up all night in the autobus." I had already seen the "autobus," a creature of uncertain habits, scheduled to leave Bokhara on "train-days" at any time between 6 and 10 in the morning. But the more determined passengers wedged themselves into the vehicle, already crowded with live and dead food-stuffs, on the previous afternoon. Crushed, comatose and triumphant, they remained in possession of what half the town seemed to covet until, 15 or 18 hours later, the autobus decided to start.

My friend urged me not to take any chances. They could arrange for me to board the bus in the yard where it lodged. If I did so twenty-four hours beforehand, I would be able to pick my seat. "No," said I, with more decision than I felt. "There must be a phaeton capable of getting to Kagan."

"Seven miles, or is it eleven——?" The Bokharans were all alike in their inability to compute distance. Doubtful voices discussed the merits of the phaeton-drivers known to them. Eventually, the Tadjik with whom I had discovered the Chor Minor, swore, not only that he would call for me the next day at 5 a.m. but that, by fair means or foul, he would simultaneously produce a vehicle.

* That month the light railway was not running.

Half a dozen of us were drinking tea in the bazaar. For an hour we had been waiting for plov, but the time had passed quite pleasantly while we argued as to how, when, and indeed if, I could leave Bokhara. When the cook, seated on a shelf above us, said that his plov had become a miracle, we talked no more. Cross-legged upon the floor of the booth, with the heat from a row of samovars burning our backs and grease falling on us from the cooking-pots over our heads, we ate. We ruminated and then ate more.

Replete, we wandered back to the new town and the last thing the Tadjik said to me, through the medium of the Persian, was: "At five or before five, even at four, I will come."

At that moment I would have trusted him with my life, but transport was a more serious affair. So I consulted the Jewess in the office, who still apparently abhorred me. Or perhaps she objected to the mental effort communication with me required. By means of moving the clock hands back and forth, I imagined that I had made her understand my requirements. The fact that I was going did undoubtedly give her pleasure. Her fine features relaxed on the edge of a smile. We parted on the mutual understanding that I should be called at four, and that a phaeton would arrive not more than an hour later.

For my own assurance, I confided my projects to as many of my fellow lodgers as could understand my execrable mixture of Usbeg and Russian. After much conversation, we all went to sleep.

At five I woke. Not a soul stirred in the dormitory, but before I had finished dressing, everybody was awake and helpful. The Jewess was roused, but she refused to leave her bed. "Chasp, chasp," she repeated, and the word sounded like a knell for, according to the manner of its pronunciation, it can mean, "immediately," "presently," "some time," or "never." By six, I was in despair and by seven, comparatively indifferent. No horse that I had yet seen in Bokhara could do more than three miles an

hour, and although I might have walked to the station, I couldn't have carried bedding and suitcase on my back.

When the office clock said eight, the Tadjik arrived and the abortive efforts of a dozen people to find a vehicle came to an end. For the newcomer knew of a phaeton. I think he had probably stolen it the previous night, for when, in procession, we had tramped a few miles in the dust between waking houses, we found a very angry peasant hammering upon a door. My friend produced a key. The furious man precipitated himself into the yard on the other side of the door and metaphorically, fell upon the neck of a horse, already harnessed and already exhausted.

There followed an argument which to all others I had heard was as the day of judgment to a summer shower. The peasant, whip in hand, looked as if he would be thankful to murder any or all of us. But greed defeated him. His small pig's eyes narrowed as he realised the magnitude of his opportunity. Here was a foreign lunatic who had evidently decided that she could only go to Kagan in his carriage. Without wincing, the man demanded a sum that would certainly have bought the whole outfit. Silence fell upon my companions, for they had been brought up in the tradition of economy. State enterprise they understood, but this private buccaneering shocked them.

They looked at me doubtfully and immediately the peasant raised his fare. By this time, I didn't care what he asked and the last figures were of such magnitude that they were not covered by my arithmetic.

"Kagan," I said, and got into the phaeton. In another hour or so, we had actually started. My luggage, which in any European country would have been inadequate for a week-end, filled seat and floor. I balanced on the top of the bedding with my legs thrust over the side. In this fashion we rocked gently out upon the road. I supposed it must be about ten. The train, of course, would have

gone, but I could camp on the platform for a day or two. There would be any number of others doing the same thing.

Half-way to Kagan, the driver ceased to urge his horse into unnatural movement. He leaned backwards and demanded the astronomical sum he had last mentioned. I knew the fare should be about twenty roubles and I had no intention of paying more than twice that amount as tribute to Private Enterprise. So I said I had no money with me but an unlimited supply would be at my disposal in Kagan. The peasant was very naturally suspicious, but he had no more trumps. Having missed the train, I had twenty-four hours, at least, to waste. It didn't matter to me at all how long we waited under some willow trees beside the road. Having used all the words with which he was familiar, the peasant produced a water-pipe and sat down in the dust to think. I read one of my four books on Russian Turkestan. It was probably Ella Maillart's, for I found her most encouraging in times of difficulty. Nobody else that I know of has seen so much in Soviet Central Asia, or told so admirably of incidents and events and the mind which judged between them. I used to read Bosworth Goldman when I felt cynical, and Egon Kirsch when credulous. I found "X.Y.Z." enchanting when my brain was empty and my body satisfied, but Ella, the incomparable Ella, gave me reassurance. Her long hazel eyes missed nothing. She would have walked, of course, to Kagan, with all she possessed on her back, but equally, she would have subsided comfortably in the phaeton and waited, with delicious interest, to see what would happen next. I could not imagine her at a loss, so I re-read her description of the Registan, wondered if, by chance, she was the journalist "excited by Samarkand" to whom X.Y.Z. refers with a suggestion of—"I am not like these others," and no doubt exasperated my driver by a display of the one quality he had not expected.

I don't know how long we sat there, the one smoking, the other reading, but when the sun became unpleasantly

hot, the driver's patience gave out. Once again, he demanded his fare and, with my eyes on my book, I nodded vaguely and smiled. I must have contrived to infer the utmost indifference for, with face suffused, he climbed back on to the box and struck the faded horse upon its head, with the result that we resumed our slow progress towards Kagan. Now I had no intention of paying the unknown, but certainly preposterous, sum required of me by an old man who evidently loathed Russia and all Russians, among whom, of course, he numbered me. He was fat and well fed, encased in a number of coats and determined to make as much as possible out of a system he loathed. So as soon as we entered the straggling lane in front of the railway station, I looked about for assistance. Walking rapidly in the opposite direction, I saw a Teutonic figure, white clad, with shaven head. Recklessly, I leaped from the phaeton and ran after it, calling: "Pardon me, Sir, do you speak German?"

"Yes," admitted my victim, and politely refrained from showing the surprise he must have felt. Hurriedly, I explained the situation.

"What fare is he asking?"

"I don't know."

The supposed Teuton, who was really from the Ukraine, permitted himself a smile. "We will soon find out."

A crowd had gathered round the phaeton. Silent, the driver leaned upon his whip. The horse hung between the shafts, with its nose an inch or two from the dust.

The pseudo-Teuton lost no time in making a speech. The crowd increased, for, in the Soviet Union, oratory is a physical pleasure to the audience as well as to the speaker. But it takes more than speech to move an Usbeg once his mind is made up.

The lane became inconveniently full, and my champion soon found himself addressing three-quarters of the population of Kagan. In the middle of a magnificent period, a G.P.U. officer arrived. His face might have been made of wood. It was yellow and unpleasantly pitted.

With a minimum of exertion, this official contrived to shift the centre of argument from the lane to his office. I have never seen anyone so unmoved by noise and the pressure of human bodies. While the Ukrainian with a horrified aside: "He's asking five hundred roubles," made an appeal to the non-existent better nature of the driver, the G.P.U. man asked with chill detachment for my passport. This time I felt no qualm. The word "transit" had become conveniently smudged. The friendly officials at the citadel had added comments which, apart from their satisfactory appearance, would, I felt sure, confuse the issue. If it came to the worst, I should say once again—as I had said in Termez—that I was going to Moscow. I need not add that I had no intention of going there either quickly or direct. But the G.P.U. man was tired, or perhaps he had more important matters to consider. He returned my passport without a shadow of expression, reduced the driver to silence, after which he ordered me to pay fifteen roubles. The peasant did not even protest.

The Ukrainian picked up my bedding. The G.P.U. man saluted, and within five minutes we were out of the office and on the station platform. My watch said eleven o'clock and the sun about noon. "I suppose there's no chance of a train till to-morrow," I said, and wondered if the Ukrainian would do anything about lodging. It is amazing the amount of trouble to which men and women all over the Soviet Union put themselves for the sake of strangers. Of course, it is very bad for the strangers, for one learns to rely on the first person one meets. Indeed, it is hardly ever necessary to do anything for oneself. And I was really only waiting for the Ukrainian to make helpful suggestions, when he surprised me by saying: "You've plenty of time. To-day's train hasn't gone. It's a few hours late. That's all."

"What time is it, then?" I asked, remembering that I'd had no breakfast.

The Ukrainian was disturbed. "It is so long since I've had a watch," he said.

Enquiries among the crowd of passengers clustered round the ticket office proved useless. Nobody knew the time. Nobody cared. "It is perhaps too early to eat——" suggested my companion with diffidence.

I contradicted him.

In the station restaurant, the clock said 8.30. Confused by hunger and the excessive heat, I began to set my watch. A helpful waitress pointed out that the clock had stopped. We went out again into the lane, where a magnificent timepiece hung above the entrance. The hands pointed to 7.23. A mocking sun rode in mid-heaven and the heat was overpowering. "I think that is yesterday's time," observed an intelligent traveller, filling his kettle at the hot water tap.

In spite of the solar evidence, we compromised on 9 a.m. and everybody agreed that it was much too early to think about the train. In three or four hours perhaps——

Returning to the restaurant, I breakfasted on good brown bread, tea and two hard-boiled eggs. The meal cost 75 kopeks, and I bought a packet of twelve coarse, black cigarettes for two roubles. The Ukrainian drank a glass of beer with me, told me that he "belonged to cotton," which in Usbegistan represents manna from a practical, commercial heaven, and that at the moment he worked on the transport side. He said: "We've gone ahead so fast during the last few years that we can't move what we produce. All our problems are concerned with transport. We can't get the machinery here—by the way, the best cotton-pickers are still American—and we can't get the raw stuff away. It stands to reason we can't bother about passenger trains when we haven't enough rolling-stock to carry material. The first Five Years Plan had to deal with undimensional figures in regard to goods transport. The second Plan provides for passenger traffic. Next year, it'll be much better, but half the people you see here or at any station don't need to travel." He explained that a train journey had become a form of amusement like

the cinema. The richer peasants indulged in this new sport without any purpose except that of returning to talk about their adventures. "There is also a great deal of movement in search of work," said the Ukrainian, "for the newspapers have advertised the need of labour. Usbegs don't think. They just herd into the nearest train and go in a mass to some place with a familiar name."

CHAPTER XLI

TO SAMARKAND

WHEN the Ukrainian left me, I went out on to the platform because it was less torrid in the open air. Groups of peasants camped wherever a wall gave shade. I was amused to notice how carefully they guarded their luggage, although they would have left it quite happily for hours on a couch in any village tea-house.

A seller of sweet drinks wandered among the passengers who disposed of whatever they bought at a gulp and put the price at the bottom of the glass. Many of the men wore flowers in their caps and one or two carried fighting quail in their coats. There was much conversation, but no shouting. It seemed to me that the men argued at great length in pleasant voices, with slow determined gestures. The women whispered among themselves. They were all peasants, graceful as animals while they idled, half recumbent and wholly relaxed, but clumsy when they moved.

I talked, with difficulty, to one or two and a Mullah who spoke Arabic treated me to a monologue on local character and conditions. He was a Tadjik and therefore more adaptable than his companions. He said: "The Usbegs are direct. They won't bargain. They go straight to the point. They are heedlessly cruel. Men beat their wives, but not their best horses. Sons often kill their fathers for the inheritance. Every Usbeg carries a knife and he won't walk a step if he can help it. The old men are lost without their horses. A horse to a peasant is no more than a walking stick. But so many animals have died or been killed."

Without fear or hesitation, the Mullah spoke of the

great famine during which millions starved because insufficient wheat came from Siberia and the local peasants had been forced to grow cotton instead of grain to eat. During this period of Soviet fanaticism, largely due to muddled thinking, herds had been taken from farmers who knew how to look after them and distributed among the ignorant. Beasts had died, been killed, disappeared! It was the usual story of a great experiment conducted at too quick a pace. The speaker, who was comparatively young, had travelled a good deal in the Soviet Asian republics and in spite of his religious training, he appeared to be tolerant and well informed. He told me that for centuries the Usbegs had been ruled by priests and land-owners who together represented the most Conservative element in Central Asia. On the other hand they had no instinctive religion. They took on—second-hand as it were—the saints and Mullahs revered by their more spiritual neighbours, the Tadjiks. "The Usbegs," he concluded, "are ambitious but afraid of responsibility. The Kazaks and Khirgiz are more progressive, for they went to school before the revolution and their villagers are already developing the needs of civilisation. You'll find gramophones, lamps, stoves, all sorts of new things in their houses and even in their yurts."

"And the Tadjiks?" I asked.

"They are too quick," said the Mullah. "They have made rebellions and revolutions. They have made brigands and martyrs. Now they are making factories."

When neither of us could think of anything more to say, I returned to the waiting-room. There I found dozens of people stretched full length on the wooden benches and on the floor. The heat was suffocating, for the sun poured straight in through unshaded windows and a cloud of flies thickened the already stale air. I spread out my bedding in a corner and prepared to sleep, but a very fat woman beside me seemed to be on the verge of apoplexy. She panted in alarming fashion, and at intervals tried to say something which I couldn't understand. "She is anxious

about her child," explained an unshaven youth in the horrible mixture of tongues which he thought was German. I looked for a child among the mass of luggage and heaped human bodies, but none was visible.

Then I discovered the crêche. It consisted of two shuttered rooms, deliciously cool, on the other side of the station. A row of cots with frilled coverlets stood against a wall. In them the smallest children were playing with a varied selection of toys. The older ones were building houses, or making models out of plasticine. A nurse in a white apron was distributing milk and biscuits. In a tiled cubicle, a capable-looking woman was bathing a boy who wouldn't be parted from a spotted wooden horse.

In contrast to the crowded waiting-room, the crêche was paradise. After the usual misunderstandings, I found the particular child I sought. It looked excessively comfortable and well fed, so I returned to console the mother. Sweat ran down her face. Hair was plastered flat upon an unwashed brow. Humped against the wall, she continued to pant while making ineffective gestures to ward off the flies. Inevitably, I contrasted the pampered children in the crêche with their miserable relations strewn about the waiting-room. I wondered what would be the effect of cherishing the new generation for the first ten or fifteen years of its life and then turning it loose to fend for itself in a singularly uncomfortable world. Meanwhile I procured tea for the unfortunate mother and lent her my mattress, but when, at last, the train arrived late in the afternoon, she had sunk into a coma. All I could do was to summon the G.P.U. man. I understood him to say that as she had a ticket she must certainly travel, but we left without her. At the last moment, I nearly found myself in possession of her child, for the crêche attendant rushed out with the infant in her arms, recognised my head among a dozen others at a window, and thrust the infant at me. Simultaneously, every known word went out of my head, but I retained sufficient presence of mind to seize the wretched child and force it out of the window. The train was

beginning to move. I wondered whether I should have to commit murder, or adopt a Mongol, but as I waved the human bundle above the platform, the G.P.U. man materialised. In despair, I shrieked to him and his phlegmatic attitude fell to pieces. The last I saw of him was with a small and angry, but doubtless potentially effective Bolshevic howling in his arms and a crowd of disappointed passengers gathering round him.

The hard carriage into which, with the aid of a yellow-faced cinema-operator, I had heaped myself amidst a mass of bedding, teapots and children, seemed to be occupied entirely by Mongols. On every wooden shelf there were rows of swart, round heads. Narrow eyes looked out above flat cheek-bones. At first glance there seemed to be no bodies attached to the heads, for the Central Asian peasant makes an art of disposing his limbs, with comfort, in the most inadequate space.

Some Jewesses with silk kerchiefs over their blue-black hair, had piled themselves upon a brilliantly orange trunk. A very smart young woman in red muslin with a plush coat combed and patted her marcelled hair until it looked like corrugated cardboard. A man in a Russian blouse profusely trimmed with caracul used a toothpick to great effect.

There seemed to be no possibility of improving my position, so I sat helplessly on my luggage and waited for somebody to exert himself—or herself—on my behalf. My confidence was not unjustified. After a short while, a charming young woman in the uniform of a ticket collector asked me for my life history. Before I could supply it, the cinema operator, whose citron coat matched his skin, and the wearer of the fur-trimmed blouse, began to explain me. Neither of them, so far as I knew, had ever seen me before, but by the end of the highly imaginative conversation we were fast friends.

With elaborate gestures, the two men explained that relief was near. And, indeed, very shortly a pale and dripping figure in shirt and trousers, both slipping, oozed through the crowd. He looked Chinese and he spoke

Tadjik, of which, by this time, I had acquired a few words. Without hesitation he removed two children, a rather charming black kid, a water-pipe and a strongly smelling bundle from on top of me. He then pulled me to my feet and, never relaxing a military grip on my wrist, he dragged me to the end of the carriage and thrust me into the wooden cubicle reserved for the conductor. Labouring after us came Russian blouse and yellow coat with my luggage, which they had been using as battering rams.

Thereafter, I travelled in what seemed to me the greatest comfort. True, the wooden seat was so narrow that my bedding continually slopped off the edge, but my new friends contrived a wall of peculiar-shaped baggage behind which I lay as if in a rather cramped coffin. While I remained recumbent, I had an excellent view of the country slipping past the low window.

The train must have been averaging ten to fifteen miles an hour, so it should have taken as many hours to cover the 150 miles between Kagan and Samarkand. Actually, it arrived about 24 hours late and I spent a night and a day in the wooden box, which the conductor had so chivalrously ceded me.

The country across which we crawled, or in the middle of which we stood stationary for hours and without apparent reason, was chiefly desert tufted with grey camel thorn. Occasionally green grass flushed the empty landscape, and in this pasture land a few camels and one or two small flocks grazed. But there was no great stir of life as on the Steppes of Afghanistan and no feeling of spring fecund with young animals.

Near Kagan I saw some ragged yurts and at the stations there were always passengers waiting. These huddled towards the train as soon as it stopped, but with a hopeless patience born of many days' waiting. Few found places.

I had read of the "ribbon development" along the railway, but apart from the domed stations shaped like mosques, I saw nothing indicative of progress except two or three large farms. These consisted of one-storey

buildings. The whitewashed mud sagged under heavy roofs. A few animals wandered about the stockyards. Sometimes a woman in a print dress, or a man with a canvas blouse belted over his trousers, leaned upon a rail, but the general effect was of emptiness and inertia. The Usbeg peasant has not yet exchanged his habitual sloth for the insistent and often nervous, haste of his teachers who, by shock-work, would change the pace of centuries.

From Kagan to Samarkand, I was cherished with much food. Night and day my three friends appeared with bowls of sour milk, tea that tasted like mud, excellent bread and lumps of cheese. We talked an immense amount. I understood very little and I cannot believe that the others were more fortunate. Undeterred, however, we went on talking—and smoking. I shared my chocolate and cigarettes. As the atmosphere thickened and the heat became suffocating, for the window refused to open, and a crush of bodies blocked the door, we became more intimate. I dozed and woke to find the Russian blouse asleep upon my knees. A young officer, whom I hadn't previously seen, was confused with the cinema-operator on the floor.

We woke, grimed and sticky, but there was no water to wash. The glutinous day dragged on. I felt as if I must adhere to everything I touched, but the others were remarkably cheerful. They said Samarkand was a metropolis. There I would find all modern comfort. The hotel was new. It had many bathrooms.

From their conversation I gathered an impression of primæval Asia turned into a paradise of American plumbing. And I admired, with a corresponding sense of shame, the ability of my companions to remain alert, kind and effective in spite of heat, dirt, and cramp. The conductor looked as if he'd been wrung and mangled, but he was always hopping or slipping with eel-like agility into the corridor to fetch oddments of food and drink from his private store. The others exuded an amiable patience with the odour of flesh and sweat and reflections on life in general. Russian blouse felt that women were symbolical

of sorrow, and without sorrow no man could effectively enjoy himself. A man must live on edge, always afraid and always keyed to risk whatever he had. "Fear is the strongest and the most essential of all emotions. It is the key-note, without which one would not be in tune."

The cinema operator was more practical. He wanted to travel. He wanted a holiday. He wanted material "made in Europe."

We asked him what he would do with his holiday.

He said: "I would eat. I would look at the new German lenses. I would make love. I would not hurry."

The conductor saw the future in terms of speed. He would be content if the train would go twenty, or even thirty, miles an hour. He liked the press of people. He would be lonely without a crowd. He felt successful lording it over the somnolent, or quarrelsome mass compressed into the rocking carriage, and he dealt effectively with disturbances. Not far from Samarkand, with the train three parts dark, a man who had been very drunk decided to have a fight. He laid out a few inconspicuous peasants and then found better game in the person of a mechanic who was so angry he couldn't speak. The officer and the cinema man interfered with a shower of words. Russian blouse seized the mechanic's coat which tore from collar to hem, but the conductor got hold of a fire-axe and used the blunt end with impartial vigour. The drunken man fell in a heap and the mechanic blundered on top of him. There was a good deal of blood and the conductor, with the air of having done his simple duty, sat on my despatch case with the axe over his knees, prepared to use it again if anybody moved.

At 10.30 p.m. we arrived at Samarkand station, which is about five miles from the town. The conductor shook me warmly by the hand and refused a tip. The cinema man was going on to Tashkent, where we made plans to meet. The other two shouldered my luggage and we pushed across the platform and out into a square where droshkis

waited. There followed the father of all arguments, for Central Asian cab-drivers are the most rapacious as well as the most obstinate relics of Private Enterprise, after which the officer saluted smartly and left us, while Russian blouse and I, in close proximity, jolted towards the town.

My first impression was of cobbles, shaven trees and white flat buildings. I asked: "Where is the Registan? Where is Tamerlane's tomb?" and my companion, an architectural draughtsman, had never heard of either. He pointed out several corrugated iron roofs and waxed eloquent on the subject of the new hotel.

It stood on the corner of the main street, very pink and cubistic, slashed with the most modern windows. Inside, a bored girl sat in a pen and refused whatever anybody asked. She didn't even look up when Russian blouse asked for beds and he turned to me in despair. "There is not a room——" His glance strayed round the marble vestibule decorated with one palm in a pot. "But you can sleep here."

"No," said I firmly, and thrust my foreign passport under the nose of the bored young woman. We wrangled. There is no other word for it. And we went on, interminably repeating the same words. I would not go. She would not admit to an empty bed. But, at last, out of ill-lit back regions, there appeared a spare, splay man of Asian, but otherwise indefinite, origin. He shambled, after the fashion of an over-legged spider, and he looked venal. To him I turned with exaggerated promises and after more argument with the bored young woman and the waste of another hour while she copied all that was irrelevant on my passport, the long-limbed Asian led me by way of a promising staircase to a vast and echoing corridor. Pushing open a door that I was never subsequently able to shut, he displayed with pride a slit of a room without carpet or curtains, furnished with a table and an iron bedstead. Cigarette ash lay thick on both. Litter covered the floor.

"Where can I wash?" I asked.

The spider man looked surprised, but he showed me a tap on the landing. I turned it. There was no water.

"You wash to-morrow," said my companion, and he explained that there were five bathrooms in the hotel but they could not be used unless five people agreed to take baths at the same time in order to make it worth while to heat the water.

I asked for a bucket.

The sprawling man said: "To-morrow," so I went all over the building until I found some painter's tools, including an outsize tin. I took this back to my room, and the Asian, convinced now that only so could he hope for peace, produced water in a leaking bucket. He also brought a broom and we swept all that the previous tenant had left out on to the landing. When I asked for a lavatory, the Asian pointed first to the corridor and then to the street.

Having washed in half my precious water, I hung a blanket across the window, through which the morning sun and the eyes of Samarkand would stare from five a.m. onwards, tied the door-handle to the bottom rail of the bed with my scarf and slept comfortably on top of my bedding.

At intervals during the night, people tried half-heartedly to come in, either in search of the receptacles I had purloined or because they had already reserved that particular room, but the scarf held and they went amicably away. It occurred to me that it must be against the instincts of Central Asia to make any determined effort, especially after midnight.

CHAPTER XLII

MORNING IN SAMARKAND

NEXT morning I started my usual search for somebody who could speak a Western European tongue. The united efforts of the hotel failed to produce an interpreter, so after a great deal of fruitless telephoning following a consultation in the manager's office, I captured the interest of a student who, having read and much admired Unamuno,* could string together a few words of Spanish. With a satchel over his back, he was off to attend a lecture at the University. There, I thought, somebody would be sure to have the gift of tongues, so I attached myself to the fat, pale young man who intended to be a doctor and we walked away through the cheerful streets arguing about how much blood was necessary for a successful revolution.

The Spanish Civil War had not then begun and my companion regretted the half-hearted methods of Madrid. He regarded Socialism as a purge to be taken in one large dose. He said life was unimportant compared to progress. This seemed to me an odd theory for a doctor and I argued so fluently in my grandmother's tongue that the disciple of Unamuno failed to understand.

Meanwhile we had left the broad cobbled streets, bordered with shops, cafés and one-storey houses all colour-washed in pink, yellow and cream. We passed public gardens in the making and a "park of culture and repose" completely empty. Then we came to an immense avenue with quadruple rows of trees and a grass-bordered walk down the centre. On either side were large, modern buildings, most of them colleges, institutes or faculties.

* The famous Spanish philosopher.

A huge educational drive is in progress throughout Central Asia and Samarkand is far more interested in schooling than in politics. In fact, the new town resembles a pleasant Middle Western burg centred on a university, but there is space to spare in Russian Samarkand and an air of leisure not to be found in America.

I had had no breakfast, for the hotel provided neither food nor drink and the cafés in the main street had not yet opened, so I longed to sample the coloured drinks sold in kiosks striped like French sentry-boxes, but my companion was in a hurry. While he gave me information in the short direct sentences admitting only of the present tense with which I was so familiar after my own efforts in Tadjik and Usbeg, "There are thirty million students in the Soviet Union," and "All the best buildings in Samarkand are schools," we walked faster and faster along the splendid avenue, but all the time I was looking round for my next victim. And whenever a person of superior appearance approached, one or other of us asked if he could speak German. "But why," asked the student, after our fifth rebuff, "do you want to speak German if you are English? We read in the newspapers that you and Germany are at war, or at least on the edge of war. Why do you want to talk the language of your enemies?"

At that moment, a short, strong-shouldered man, immaculate in white, appeared round a corner. A shock of dark hair stood up from his fine brow. He had a big nose and sanguine complexion. He was laughing and gesticulating as he talked to his companion. Into their conversation I burst with my parrot-like question and the man I addressed answered at once, "No, but I speak French."

"Then I am saved!" I retorted with such fervour that he threw his head back and laughed aloud. That absurd sentence "Then I am saved" proved to be my "Open Sesame" to Samarkand. For my new friend turned out to be a professor of biochemistry at the Faculty of Medicine, and he promptly asked me to stay with him and his wife in

a small house surrounded by a cherry orchard, not far from the avenue by which already I measured position and distance. But first he took me to the University where he had business. On the right of the door as we entered was a sort of cafeteria, where a white-bloused youth sold glasses of sour junket, stale cakes and pallid sausages. Beyond this I would not go. For I supposed, from experience garnered in Bokhara, that we should spend the rest of the day walking. So the Professor left me to lap up curdled sheep's milk, while he went in search of the educational gods.

After this, friends hailed upon me like manna from heaven. First came a young woman who actually talked English. She was an actress and very smart, with blood-red nails and a rather gorgeous mouth that clashed with her complexion. But she found Samarkand dull and was leaving as soon as possible for Tashkent, where she assured me it was not necessary to go to bed early for lack of anything to do.

In the middle of this conversation, the Jewish doctor whom I had met on the train from Termez to Bokhara walked into the cafeteria and greeted me as a long-lost relation. "I would have met you at the station had you told me when you were coming!" he exclaimed in German, and while he talked, he kept hold of my arm as if to assure himself I should not again disappear. His shirt was open at the neck. An embroidered cap perched jauntily upon one side of his head. Once again, he reminded me of Bashan's bull, splendidly curled and oiled.

The white-clad Professor returned with an eminent colleague, head of the Faculty of Medicine, and we all sat round a small wooden table, talking in the most convivial fashion, the two Professors in French, the Jew in German, the actress in what became less and less like English, and a very tall and elegant young student, portentously introduced to me as "an agrarian expert," in startling American slang eked out by Russian nouns.

Everybody was immensely kind and determined to show me his or her version of Samarkand. The Jewish

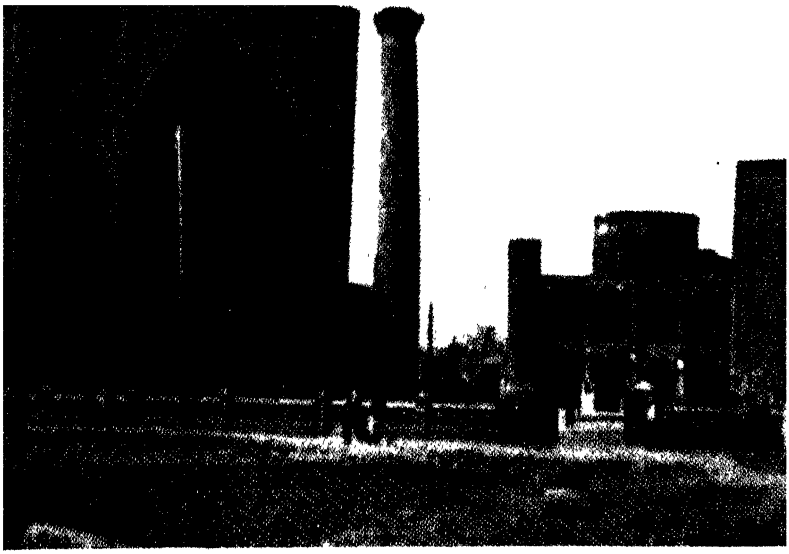
doctor wanted to start at once for a sanatorium some miles distant, the only one of its kind in Central Asia. The tall student murmured about a night-club where one could actually fox-trot to the wireless, but it was all very provincial. I would laugh at it after Moscow and he mentioned the name of the capital as if it were an oasis in a waterless desert. He was counting the days till, possessed of an agricultural degree, he could go North and live in a big city where he would teach in theory what he hoped never to practise.

The first Professor who was a little like the "Laughing Cavalier," wished to set forth immediately in search of his wife who "had a class somewhere," but as he hadn't the least idea where she was likely to be, I contrived to deflect him from his purpose. For I couldn't bear to remain a moment longer in Samarkand without seeing the Registan and the Gur Emir.

So it was that, after making an infinity of plans, few of which I subsequently kept, I found myself seated beside the laughing Professor in a droshky for which I had agreed to pay twenty roubles an hour.

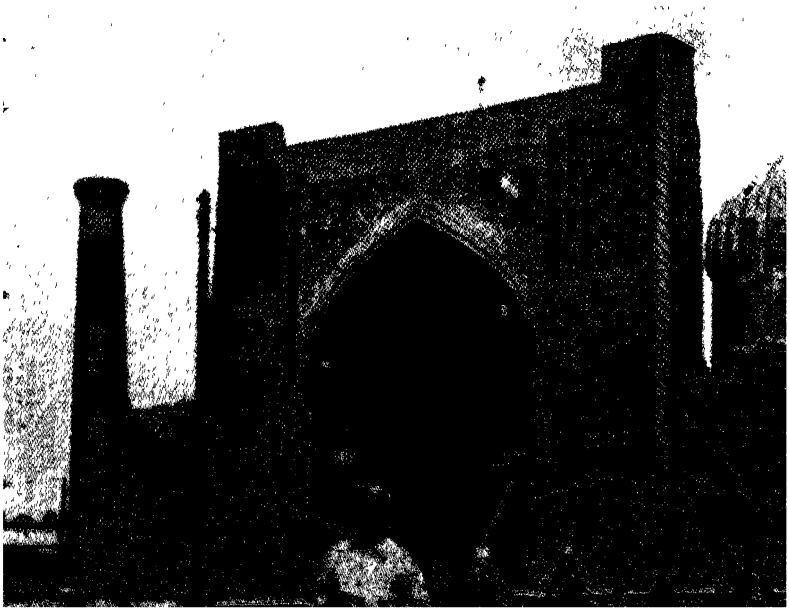
"We could so much more cheaply have walked——" said my companion, bouncing round to point out new buildings. But in spite of his fervent admiration for the new and his conviction that in a few years the Soviet Union would be the strongest and most progressive force in the world, he had a philosophical appreciation of the old. For when, quite suddenly, between the town of schools and clinics, charmingly American, and the flat-roofed mud city of bazaars and ruins, we came upon the Gur Emir, he paid tribute of silence.

The Mausoleum of Tamerlane stands bereft of walls, but the surrounding houses have withdrawn to give space to the still beautiful building. A few acacias, faintly flushed with blossom, cast shadows over the crumbling material evolved from Central Asian mud and rapidly reverting to its origin. The ribbed pumpkin dome rises proudly—and still flecked with blue—above the four-



Above, the famous Registan square at Samarkand.

Below, the medersa of Shir Dar.



Bibi Khanaum: tomb of Tamerlane's favourite wife.

square mausoleum that contains the tombs of Timur the Lame, the "iron cripple" who claimed descent from Genghiz Khan, of Mohammed Sultan, his grandson, killed in battle in 1403, and of another grandson, the learned Ulug Beg, who corresponded with Galileo on the subject of astronomy and was execrated by contemporary Moslems because his scientific discoveries did not accord with the Koran. Under the same dome, so worn now and dimly blue, are the graves of two earlier Saints, Nur ed Din Bassur and Sheikh Burkhan ed Din, exhumed and reburied in his own tomb by Tamerlane in order that the Gur Emir should be a holy place, guarded by the prayers of the Faithful.

The tomb of "*the* Emir"—when Timur-i-lenk died in 1405 there can have been no other to challenge the haughty asseveration—is approached by an arch with no supporting wall. It rises, still lovely, out of young grass, and in the shelter of projecting bricks, the mosaics are still deeply blue. Their design has all the delicacy of Isfahan, but a richer colour.

Entranced, I wandered up a paved path and back—far back—into the past. For beside the door of the tomb under a canopy of vine, a delicious old man, bundled in coats of yellow, flame and the Prophet's own green, sat cross-legged upon a rope couch, reading the Koran. His turban ballooned above a face the colour of parchment, seamed with many lines. A pair of horn spectacles balanced on the end of his nose, which was curved like the beak of a hawk, or like the toes of the beautiful yellow shoes neatly placed upon the Bokharan rug. Beside them stood a chased silver ewer, a basin of the same metal finely wrought and a long-necked bottle that should have held nectar. A boy with one wall eye waved a censer and the smoke drifted slowly over the many-coloured figure scarcely larger than the book from which it read. Bent above the gigantic tome, the old man recited in purest Arabic, while his finger traced the illuminated letters. "Victory is from Allah and the beginning (literally the 'opening-out') is near," he

murmured. Wishing to attract his attention, I suggested, "Surely that is on the other page."

The old man looked up and I saw his eyes bleared behind the useless spectacles. "I see the words in my heart," he said. Another old man, brown as chestnut rind and wearing also the voluminous garments of the past, reproved me gently. "He is blind, but the words are true."

CHAPTER XLIII

THE GLORY OF TAMERLANE

FROM the Gur Emir, where, in peaceful surroundings, with the clean, colourless houses silent and a little remote, one can imagine the blue loveliness that must have astonished the fifteenth century, we drove down a slope, thick in dust, to the old town. And immediately we became immersed in what might have been a London fog. For dust hung thick over the maze of alleys and half-fallen houses. Through the stinging substance, I had a glimpse of markets thronged with peasants who seemed much dirtier, shabbier and worse tempered than those with whom I had become familiar in Afghanistan. In Mazar-i-Sherif I had seen no women, but a great number of smiles. In the bazaars of Samarkand I saw lots of women, most of whom had come in from the country wearing black or coloured parandjas that covered them from head to foot, and the hideous horsehair veils thick with flies. But the men's faces were cheerless. The sense of brotherhood, familiar to Islam, had gone, and the insistent friendliness of eager socialism had not yet come. So there were no picturesque greetings, "Go in peace and safety," "Allah make you strong," or, "May your sons be an honour to you," and no embraces. Friends of long standing did little more than grunt when they met, and even in the tea-houses, whose carpet-covered couches spread wherever space offered, faces remained grim and men counted out the price of their drinks as if they were measuring the sands of life.

Such gloom, of course, may have been due to the wind, which raised dirt and dust like a blanket and flung it upon the shelterless people who bought and sold, drank thirstily, and stood in front of the cook-shops to eat meat impaled on

sticks, with their heads sunk tortoise-like into the collars of their drab and faded coats. That day, certainly, there was a blight upon the markets, and I was disappointed in the old town straying shaggily round the Registan.

In vain I told myself that this most famous square was surrounded by buildings fabulous even in the fifteenth century, that it was renowned as the centre of art and civilisation on the greatest caravan route of all time—the Silk Road between China and the West.

I saw only a three-sided square heaped with dust and three great buildings crumbling into decay. I stood on a heap of rubble, with shoddy tea-houses behind me, a tuneless gramophone blaring and a banner displaying an anti-religious slogan. I stared, with aching eyes, through a yellow haze, at the Tillah Kari medersa, "the thousand and second night," flanked on one side by Ulug Beg's mosque built in 1417, and on the other by the Shir Dar, which is an exact replica, except in the matter of mosaics, although it was constructed 200 years later.

So little do the present inhabitants of Samarkand know about the history of their town that the Professor cheerfully explained to me that the builder of the Shir Dar (in the seventeenth century) was obliged to erect the far more ancient Ulug Beg medersa opposite as a punishment for having decorated the façade of the first with lions' heads, forbidden to Islam with all portraiture of men or beasts.

In spite of the wind I insisted on sitting down upon my rubble-heap in order to consider the Registan. The Professor stood beside me, shifting from one foot to another. Silently we gazed at the brownish yellow, the greens and blues of the great façades. Across the intervening space, a few figures in nondescript coloured coats, belted above the hips, were blown amidst a confusion of dust and litter. After a while we followed them into the Tillah Kari medersa. Once through the great arch flanked by a double row of cells, there was peace. To the left rose the immense iwan, the formal arch leading into the mosque, and in front of it were ranged a few pairs of shoes.

In the centre of each wall was an alcove set in mosaics that still kept their fresh colouring, and on either side were the double galleries with pointed arches into which cells opened. Most of these seemed to be deserted, but in one three women, veil-less but wearing the parandja, were sewing, and in another an earnest man was cooking over a handful of charcoal.

In silence we climbed, by heaps of mud and fallen bricks, to the top of the Tillah Kari,* and from a windswept roof looked down on the twin mosques. The mosaics were, to a certain extent, restored by Viatkin, and a Soviet writer states that 65,000 roubles were spent in one year on the preservation of the Registan. But from the roof of the seventeenth century Tillah Kari, the famous square seems to be surrounded by ruins. The mosque of Ulug Beg is still magnificent because the iwan and the colossal square of walls which frame it are deeply blue, but the two minarets which flank the main arch have lost their tops. One of them leans slightly away from the main building. The domes which originally surmounted the roof have gone. The whole structure now looks truncated, though it is only fair to admit that, on close inspection, I couldn't tell the difference between the old mosaics and the new tiles made in the same sort of oven and applied with careful delicacy by Viatkin's workmen. A good deal has also been done to restore the leaning minaret to its original position. By means of slow pressure exerted over a year and a half the structure has been forced approximately upright, and the ornamental brickwork has not suffered to any appreciable extent.

The Shir Dar still keeps one of its lovely ribbed domes set upon the round base peculiar to Central Asia and although the minarets have lost their conical tops, they are still vividly coloured. Three hundred years have mellowed the blue, green and yellow of Talank Toush's building, but they have not entirely destroyed the sunshine and sea-water effect.

* Built in 1630.

When we came down from the roof of the medersa, we paused under the great façades of Shir Dar and looked up at the lions' heads which had caused such ferment of criticism among the true believers. Time had robbed them of suggestive outline. They fitted into the general effect of an autumn garden. In her delicious "Turkestan Solo," Ella Maillart quotes some of the phrases inlaid in Arabic characters upon the walls of Shir Dar: "The architect has built the arch of this portal with such perfection that the entire heavens gnaws its fingers in astonishment, thinking it sees the rising of some new moon," "Only the eagle of thought could presume to attain to the summit of this medersa," and "Never, in all the centuries, will an acrobat's thoughts, even with the bow of phantasy, scale the forbidden heights of this minaret." There is another: "When thou goest on a journey, leave thy spirit on the path, else shalt thou not obtain full merit." In fact: "Partir, c'est mourir," because, on every journey, one must leave some of oneself behind.

From the Registan we drove to Bibi Khanoum, which was once the largest mausoleum in the world. Built in five years, five memorable years of conquest while Tamerlane was away on his campaigns, the mosque was intended to be the burial place of his favourite wife, a Chinese princess —or was she a dancing girl? The work was completed in 1404, and it is said that just before his death Tamerlane had himself carried into the great court, three hundred feet long, so that he might for the last time approve the extent—and perhaps also the beauty—of his work. It is also said that Bibi Khanoum, as autocratic as her lord, had the Arab architect flung from the top of the building as soon as it was completed, either because he dared to love her, or—more probably—lest he should dare to erect another equally magnificent mausoleum for somebody else. It seems to have been a Mongol habit to reward the best artists with death and those of slightly less eminence with blindness.

To-day, all that remains of Bibi Khanoum's splendour is

the main arch, eighty feet high and still ravishingly blue. We entered the court, once paved, now grass-grown and shaded by acacias, through the new wall which surrounds the mass of ruins. A group of Mullahs in pale blue coats and white turbans, sitting cross-legged on a brilliant carpet, lent colour to the foreground. An iron bowl stood on a column. In the middle distance reared the white marble lectern which used to hold Caliph Osman's koran. It was brought from Mongolia by the scientist, Ulug Beg, and under it, in the dawn, pregnant women used to crawl, fasting, in the hope that heaven would reward them with sons.

At the end of the grass and the trees, beyond the great heaps of fallen wall, rose the still lovely façade, centring on the iwan. Above it, the arch just held, and through it we could see the last fragment of the dome, but it looked as if the next storm must destroy both. I felt I must tread gently as I approached the aching blue of this cardboard façade that has no back at all. Scarcely daring to breathe I climbed among the broken bricks, turquoise, sapphire, and chrome yellow. With infinite precaution, I seated myself upon a slab of faience and I looked away from the remnants of minarets with their raised design in sea- and sky-coloured bricks. I saw the mighty heaps of mud that had been the reception chamber of the mosque, the pylons, reminiscent of gigantic ant-heaps, that were once the ramparts of an arrogant, although borrowed, Faith, and I saw also the market in the square and the dim, flat roofs of a city, mud-built, unchanged since the days of Tamerlane, or the Hegira.

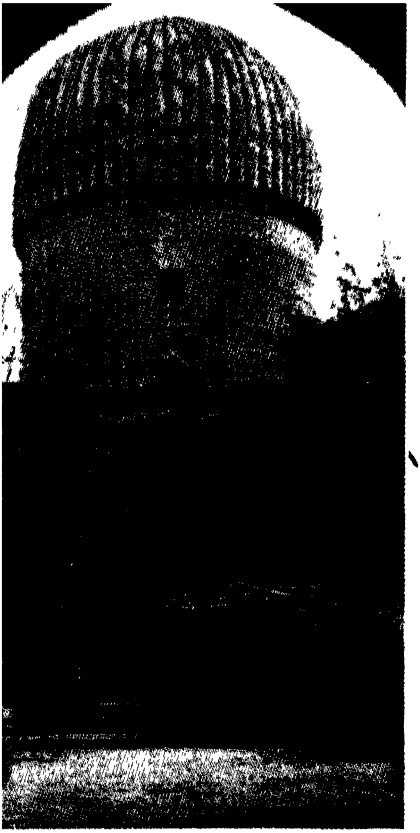
As I clambered down from the roof of Bibi Khanoum's "Song of love in stone," a trickle of sound went with me. It was made by the falling mud. A sharper noise came from the bricks which my steps dislodged. I could imagine the first of them falling on the heads of the worshippers who had gathered to honour the completed mosque. For the Arab architect built too quickly. Without the Russian cannonade of 1868, time would have

played its usual havoc with what was in effect a grandiose conception carried out in mud.

Beyond the slow, secret sounds of disintegration, I could hear the confusion of noise in the bazaars. Quite clearly, there came to me the succulent slap of breads plastered on the mud walls of an oven. Next to the bakery, there was a school, where noisy Usbeg children, very round and gay in their multi-coloured clothes, poured on to the balcony to do their afternoon drill. They looked healthy and insubordinate, and their red cheeks reminded me of fruit, ripe and on the point of falling. Above their shouts and their unruly footsteps, I heard a loud-speaker in one of the tea-houses, where peasants, shabby and somewhat sullen, drank tea out of handleless cups or slept on wooden couches. The clamour of the tinsmiths' alley provided a background of insistent noise. It had the same monotony as the hum of insects in a tropical forest.

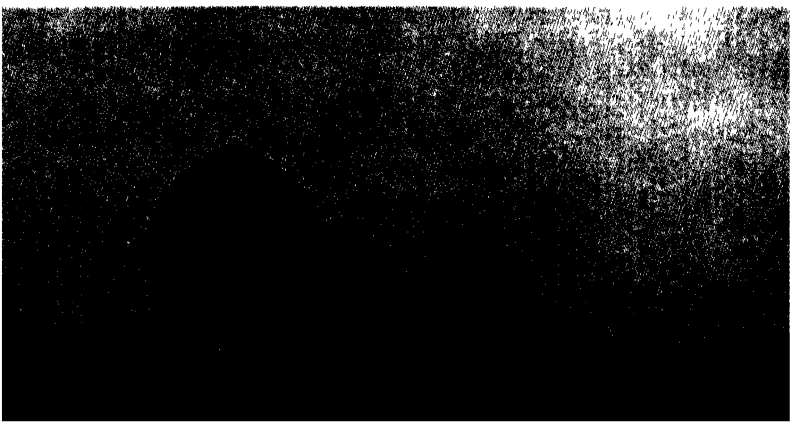
Close to me, but invisible, somebody played upon a metal-stringed instrument. Only the market was silent. Without unnecessary words, the peasants, striped like hornets, sold and bought what seemed to me the last scourings of a rubbish heap. For three shillings, I procured a handful of apples not much larger than gooseberries, and I ate them with an enjoyment which surprised the Professor, while we wandered through the edge of Samarkand and over mud tracks towards Shah Zinde.

Another market spread like a Persian carpet, rich in colour, complicated in design, over the space between the grass-grown hill of tombs and a new mosque. Beyond it, at the top of a rough, green slope, with trees in the foreground, I saw a host of cupolas grey and without colour. It was beginning to rain. Under the trees peasants were cooking and eating their afternoon meal. The air smelt agreeably of meat and grease. Camels and donkeys filled the lane, which was inches deep in dust. While the driver argued with countrymen as obstinate as himself, I got out and walked over the hill, where women were gathering wood and dung for fires. Under my feet were innumerable



Gur Emir, seen through the entrance arch. This is the Tomb of Tamerlane at Samarkand.

Shah Zinde, outside Samarkand: the burial-place of the Mongol kings.



tombs. Some of them burst through the grass. Others moulded it into swelling shapes. Piled as it were on top of the nameless graves, so softly rising above trees, were the domes of Shah Zinde, differently shaped and sized, but all clay-coloured. They looked like soap bubbles blown into a grey sky.

The correct approach to this burial place of "the Living King," Shah Zinde, and his successors, is by means of a flight of steps rising steeply out of the lane.

Finding, at that time, no other entrance, I went down between the abandoned tombs of Afro Siab, that mountain of the dead, and climbed again, with the Professor panting behind me, through a glazed portal, with to the left a very lovely diwan or reception chamber, its roof carved and its beams glittering with blue, red and gold, and in front the narrow street of tombs. As one enters this cool and shadowed way, the façades of what appear to be miniature mosques stand up on either side. There are ten of them, all different and all exquisitely coloured. A blue dome surmounts the grave of Tamerlane's nurse or foster-mother. Mosaics of Persian design, carvings, inlay, a lovely riot of colour, softened by time, for the first building dates from 1326, ornament the little mausoleums of Tamerlane's son Zade and of his first wife Turkan. And here is the charm of the place. It is all so small. After the mighty Registan and the colossal destruction of Bibi Khanoum, it is a relief to find space limited by ordinary proportions.

Between walls faced deliberately with enamel, we walked without words, glancing now and then into the reception chamber of a tomb, admiring the design of Turkan Ali, the simplicity of Emir Hussein, until the little street turned sharply and the walls lost their colour.

Three more tombs that were houses all to themselves, another gateway and a tree whose bark is naturally regarded as holy, and then we came to a miniature court. I held my breath. Here at last was the beauty of which I had dreamed when, years ago, in Meshed, I saw the beginning of the

"Golden Road" that leads to Samarkand. For the court might have been steeped in sea-water. All the blues from turquoise to the deepest sapphire were reflected in the incomparable mosaics and this deep, quiet pool of colour contrasted or blended with the rich browns and golds of the earthen walls. Sea and sand with sunshine caught between them, I thought, and was reluctant to leave the warmly glowing court for the dimness of the little mosques which clustered round. There was Kutluk with the pale carved pillars and Nuri, most exquisitely tiled, called after the wife and daughter of Tamerlane, and, at the end of the court, completing the toll of "the great dead," Sayed Ahmed.

Under the delicate dome of the portico, an old man prayed, with his shoes beside him. A few Mullahs who had been drinking tea came with us through a succession of chambers hung with horses' tails, symbolic of sacrifice, banners and tattered red stuff, till we stood behind a grille and looked at the tomb of Shah Zinde, who converted the Trans-Oxus regions to Islam, and was eventually defeated and killed by the Nestorian Christians. Legend has it that his whip flowered into the two trees that shelter the court, that his horse escaped, leaving its tail behind, and that the Saint himself, decapitated, contrived to roll into a well, taking with him his head, and thus saving his place in paradise.

CHAPTER XLIV

ON THE HILL OF TOMBS

At Shah Zinde, the droshky driver decided he had had enough of us. "For why," said he, "should I go on driving you when I have earned sufficient already to eat and sleep?"

The Professor pointed out that the fare would not be paid until we were safely delivered at the hotel.

The driver looked surprised. "But you have the money with you. You can pay me now."

Further discussion followed. I avoided it because a Mullah shewed me a way out on to Afro Siab, pregnant with tombs. There I sat upon a mound and the grave, perhaps, of a Pechdad king, for the hill takes its name from the ninth ruler of that ancient Persian Dynasty, celebrated for its wars eleven centuries before Christ.

Around me stretched the shapeless mass in which historians have seen the outlines of a city built on four hills. That day, I could not imagine the market-places and the ring of forts, the flat spaces that were gardens, the streets and palaces and tombs of 3,000 years ago. But, later, when I came back alone to sit on the desolate hill, a Golgotha among high places, I could dream, like so many travellers before me, of the swift procession of history—Alexander the Great, whose ambition was to weld Asia and Europe into one nation and who, for this purpose, married Roxana, an Iranian Princess, while he wedded his soldiers to the daughters of the country; Seleucus, his greatest general and successor, whose line endured for three centuries; the Sassanid Kings, whose glories are recorded in Southern Persia; the Huns; the Arabs, inflamed by their new religion; the Iranian Samanids, who established a

capital at Bokhara and defended it against the first wandering Mongols from the Roof of the World; the Seljuks under the famous Mohammed, who, in the eleventh century, came from the Kirghiz Steppes; then Genghiz Khan the omnipotent, who had already conquered China, and after him, in the fourteenth century, Tamerlane, whose Tadjik followers held the country for 200 years. The Usbegs, descended from a Khan of the Golden Horde and from Genghiz Khan's eldest son Jachi, came in the sixteenth century, and the Russians in the middle of the eighteenth. Peter the Great's expedition to Khiva was massacred in 1717, but by 1869 Tashkent had fallen.

General Perovsk had established the eagle in Turkestan, the Emir of Samarkand had paid tribute, and the Bokharans had been defeated by General Tchernaief.

During the world war, Enver Pasha dreamed, like Alexander and Tamerlane, of uniting East and West, but this time in the bonds of Pan-Islam, a unity that he visualised stretching from Morocco to the Chinese border. This great Turkish general and politician lost his life fighting a combination of reactionaries and revolutionaries in Usbegistan, and it was left to the Soviet, called in to help the Young Bokharans against their tyrannical Emir, Olim Khan, to consummate the marriage between Asia and Europe.

But at what a price! Throughout history, the hills of Samarkand have seen slaughter on a scale that few other countries have known. Tamerlane was not the first to make the Seravshan river run red with blood, but his pyramids of skulls apparently set an example to future conquerors. And in 1932–34, the famine which killed between 6 and 8 million people swept across the Soviet Central Asian Republics, reducing all former holocausts to the proportions of a child's game with toy soldiers.

There must be an immense virility in the lands North of the Oxus, for in less than two years they have put their appalling past behind them and with youth in command, with Jewish brains in support, they are confident of the future.

When I walked down from Afro Siab, the market was still in progress in the waste space beyond the last houses of Samarkand. The sun slanted above the dome of the new mosque. The colours had faded. Clothes and building materials were rapidly acquiring the monotony of the new civilisation. And I wondered if Stalin's interpretation of the world would be more durable than Tamerlane's. For the culture of the great Mongol had been entirely artificial. He wanted to capture the trade between East and West. To do so, he created—with American speed—the finest bazaar towns between China and Europe. But no renaissance of literature and manners accompanied the fugitive magnificence produced by the tyrant's architects. The craftsmen who were brought from Delhi, Damascus and Persia accomplished their work as quickly as possible, thinking only of the immediate effect. The great buildings were erected between campaigns, and Timur the Cripple remained illiterate, a soldier instead of a statesman, harsh, cruel, a lover of truth rather than of beauty.

Samarkand was never a Rome or an Athens of Central Asia to his successors. It was just a magnificent Eastern bazaar.

In the droshky I said as much to the Professor, and while a meek and chastened driver carried on a monologue with regard to the price of hay and his horse's need of it, my host spoke eagerly of the future. He said, "All that old stuff is rotten, but now we are building something that is going to last. We have had our hard times——" Frankly, he spoke of the famine, when crowds died of hunger in the main streets, when there was not space or time for burial, when bread was more valuable than gold. "But that is over. Every year, thousands of young peasants graduate from the Soviet Schools. Machines are their prophets, production their faith. We haven't got any of your problems. There's no unemployment, no superfluity of education. We need every man or woman who can squeeze through the University. For generations we shan't have enough doctors, teachers, scientists, engineers,

mechanics. We haven't enough of anyone or anything. Think of the incentive to produce!"

We spoke of middle-class unemployment in India. The Professor could not visualise such conditions in the Soviet Union. He repeated, "More and more experts are needed every year, and we are only beginning to develop our resources." His eyes blazed. I felt he was rendered breathless by the magnitude of those resources. He said, "We've begun on the right lines. We haven't been afraid of interfering. That's been your mistake in India."

I pointed out the difference in size between the population of India and that of Soviet Central Asia. "You were dealing with a handful of Mongols, peaceful, stupid and oppressed. We were faced with a continent." I thought that India, like Ireland, "didn't know what she wanted and wouldn't be happy till she got it."

The Professor interrupted. "Be honest. We've had little more than ten years and already we've freed the women. We've given them work and wages. They're independent. They're human beings. We've jumped 1,000 years in a generation. The children who come out of our schools are fit, mentally and physically. They'll all get work. They'll all have an opportunity to go just as far as their brains allow. Their aims are entirely constructive. Can you say the same of your Indians?"

I could not answer. Except on the ground of population, I do not know the answer. For Soviet Central Asia has at this moment a social instead of a political conscience. While India is obsessed by the expedients of nationalism or imperialism, Usbegistan and Tadjikistan think in terms of human development. The contrast is interesting.

CHAPTER XLV

THE DAY ENDS

By the time we reached the pink hotel, I was once again reduced to the ignominy of hunger, but, as was so often the case in Central Asia, we had missed the hour for eating. The cafés on the main street had served the afternoon meal. The waitresses were resting.

On the square and somehow emphatic porch, my friend of the train, the Jewish doctor, waited. Bouncing to his feet, he informed me before I was out of the droshky that he had made an appointment for me to see the best sanatorium in Central Asia. In vain I protested. Within three minutes, I had been reft from the Professor and established in a still more tenuous cab, which seemed to me to hang together by faith and hope rather than by any visible means of support. The Doctor, in shirt and loose trousers, with an embroidered belt isolated between them, occupied three-quarters of the seat. In a warm and enveloping voice, he told me about the sanatorium, which would be able to house 500 patients when the new building was complete. "There has been so much tuberculosis here, owing to the dirt, the premature births and the general conditions of living, but we are making a great stand against it. We have specialists now. Moscow is helping." Throughout my journey, Moscow was to remain a personage, mysterious, inconsequential, but on the whole benevolent.

A gentle rain fell. We shared my umbrella, which was full of holes. By the time we reached the Sanatorium, my companion was soaked, but his good temper remained with him. Through an arch that had once belonged to a mosque, we drove into an orchard. The long, white hospital buildings were surrounded by a tide of blossom. I

thought it would be difficult not to get well in such surroundings.

On the veranda of a bungalow, Doctor Karabekov welcomed us, and after introducing me to his wife, a gracious lady still a trifle Eastern, and to a daughter frankly and delightedly Western, he offered us tea with spoonfuls of cherry jam. Regretfully, I noted how little effect this had upon the void within me, but our host was a Turk and could talk many languages, so we were able to converse with an enthusiasm in which my hunger was momentarily forgotten.

Doctor Karabekov combined the qualities of the scientist and the humanitarian. He had travelled widely. He knew and liked the most divergent personalities, including Ramsay MacDonald and Léon Blum. Yet his future was in some way mortgaged to Russia—perhaps because it needed him more than any other country. While we inspected the clean and airy wards, bright with flowers, I had the impression of a great warrior fighting with everything that was in him.

If Doctor Karabekov had influence, he spent it solely on behalf of his patients. His keen intelligence was matched by a quality which I can only describe as loving-kindness. This was very evident as he bent over the beds where waifs with distorted limbs were being gradually transformed into healthy and happy children. "At present, we can put up a hundred and twenty patients in winter and three hundred in summer, but we are building all the time. Look, every patient has radio ear-phones. We have a cinema every sixth day. We have nine teachers for the children and a physical culture expert. We have a library for the grown-up patients. You must see the kitchen. . . ."

In the clean, tiled apartment, presided over by women in spotless overalls, we computed that the patients had six meals a day. I am no expert, of course, but it seemed to me that the whole Sanatorium was well equipped and admirably run. Appalling contortions caused by bone disease were being dealt with by the most modern methods, in an

atmosphere of peach blossom that suggested a Persian missal.

Under the arch of the erstwhile mosque, Doctor Karabekov, bare-headed, in starched white, spoke, like everyone else, of the future. "Next year, we'll have doubled our work. In ten years, we'll have conquered tuberculosis."

On the way back to the town we sat in a gentle stream. The holes in my umbrella had become chasms. Rain collected wherever seat or floor sagged. My companion talked only of a lecture which he was to give that night. For a medical celebrity was visiting the University. "We are going to fête him. I shan't have time to change."

It was the nondescript Asian with legs like a grasshopper's who found me yet another droshky, piled me into it with my luggage, shamelessly accepted a tip in return for a futuristic blessing, and directed the driver to the address of the professor of bio-chemistry.

We had some difficulty in finding the house. It stood in a wide and pleasant lane on the outskirts of the town, and it was surrounded, like most of its neighbours, by the high mud wall characteristic of Central Asia. Inside there was a cherry orchard, and the house, one-storeyed, stood upon a wooden porch where hammocks were slung. The front door led straight into the living-room, which was furnished with a cupboard, six hard chairs and a table covered with linoleum. There were three other rooms. The seventy-year-old widow of a general occupied one of them, a mere slit in the wall, cumbered with the jetsam of her possessions. The Professor and his eldest son slept in the best bedroom, which was perhaps 12 foot square. The wife had an iron bed, which was never made, in a corner of her husband's study. A carpet-covered divan, a large desk and piles of books took up the remaining space. The second son slept on a bench in the kitchen, with his feet straggling on to the stove. So, I suppose, did the elderly maid-servant, who received the equivalent of £36 a year, her working clothes and oddments of food, in return for a

little sweeping and a good deal of washing, combined with all sorts of extraneous jobs, such as pig-killing, weeding and whitewashing. The lavatory was a hole opening out of the kitchen. There were no drains.

The Professor's wife was delightful. Robust and sensible, with rolls of fat round her hips and chin, she welcomed me warmly, saw nothing surprising in having to put up a stranger at a moment's notice, and told me I could sleep—as soon as I liked—on the divan in the study. No mention was made of food. The family, I thought, must have eaten their lunch at four in the afternoon, and would not again feel hungry till somewhere near midnight, when they would have supper. My meals that day had consisted of a glass of sour junket at 10 or 11 a.m., three miniature apples in the middle of the afternoon, milkless tea and a spoonful of cherry jam at 6 p.m.

In a language which she assured me was German, and in which certainly there were some German verbs, my hostess introduced me to a fat and shining man, entirely hairless, who might have been Ali Baba. He wore nondescript clothes, midway between East and West, with a magnificently embroidered skull-cap, and he informed me, in excellent Arabic, that he was the last, the best, the most famous trader in carpets in all Central Asia. He rattled off the names of the best known retail houses in London, Paris and Cairo, spoke tenderly of the sharpest dealer in Damascus, went into rhapsodies over an Isfahan in a celebrated private collection in Beyrout, mentioned the incomparable prayer-rug in the mosque at Kum, and then tried to sell me for thirty pounds a large modern Bokhara that shewed traces of aniline dye.

Sitting at the living-room table, smoking the coarse, black cigarettes that come to pieces at the slightest encouragement, was a lean, grey professor of chemistry who talked French. Encouraged by my hostess, who had a sanguine complexion and tired eyes, we conversed at length upon scholastic conditions in Central Asia. The Professor was keen and clever. As a Russian, he appreciated the psycho-

logical difference between the plodding Usbeg and the meteoric Tadjik. He said of the latter: "They are amazingly adaptable. Ten years have changed the gutter imp, or the ignorant bundle of superstitions and superfluous clothing, who knew only the yurt life, who lived with animals and was preyed upon by them, into the polyglot doctor or technician, capable of holding his own in a capital city."

Of the Usbeg, he said, "They are best as artisans and farmers, but they make good enough teachers, because they are patient." The Kazaks he found headstrong.

"Tell me," I asked, "when they've finished with the University, are all these young people content to live and work in what you label a 'backward region,' or do they hanker after the big Russian towns?"

The Professor, who accepted his work as a mission, said, "There is a great deal of national spirit here. Usbegs and Tadjiks are apt to feel they belong to their respective countries. They look upon the particular science they've learned as a religion which it is their duty to propagate. The best of them, no doubt, are too earnest, perhaps too narrow, but they'll make a great fight for their factories and their farms. There's good, solid material among them."

"And the Russians?" I asked, for I remembered the English-speaking student with whom I had promised to go to a night-club.

The Professor hesitated. "There is perhaps a new type, or a very old one, which does decidedly want amusement and the amenities of life. We haven't many examples yet, but it is curious, with so much to do—with evolution, as it were, in our hands—that a few young men, generally the most intelligent and the most highly strung, should crave, not only for Moscow, but for what Europe might give to Moscow." I noticed that the Professor, like the rest of his kind, spoke of Moscow as if it were an island isolated from any other country or collection of countries.

My eyelids began to droop. I wanted so much to go on talking, but the heat of the room confused me. There

was no air and a strong smell of fat came from the kitchen.

"We are building as fast as we can," said the Professor, "but still there isn't enough room for the students. Education is compulsory, even among the nomads. In a few years we'll have enforced it, right up to the Chinese frontier."

"And you'll have work for them all?" I asked, feeling my tongue clumsy.

"So long as we do not allow them to imagine they are entitled to work in any particular place. That is the danger of these sub-divisions. Nationalism is all very well as an intellectual impetus, but an educated man—or woman for that matter—should feel himself a citizen of the whole Soviet Union. His home is with his work, and that may be anywhere between Harbin and the Ukraine."

"A trifle indefinite," I protested.

The Professor said: "A sixth of the world as their heritage and it may be more—it must soon be more."

And then my hostess intervened with, "It's no use talking to her. She's asleep."

Together we went into the study. Marta, as I always called her, helped me to spread my bedding on the divan. When I asked if I could wash, she led me into the kitchen, where her son was already asleep. A trickle of grey water spilled into the sink, which was full of scraps. The son's bare feet, very dirty, reached towards it. I cleaned my teeth, but postponed the problem of ablutions.

Back in the study, I tried to open a window, heavily barred, and was immediately frustrated by my hostess, who explained that thieves might come with long sticks and hook things off the desk.

Regretfully, I resigned myself to the atmosphere, compounded of most known smells, and went at once to sleep. Hours later, it seemed to me, I was woken by the Professor, who very kindly brought me a plate of red caviare. "We are having supper," he said, "and we thought you might be hungry." Voices and laughter came from the living-room. I could hear the thin tones

of the seventy-year-old General's wife. It was then one o'clock.

Half asleep, but intensely grateful, I devoured the caviare. An hour or so later, I woke again to find Marta going to bed. It was a simple process. She kicked away her shoes, and took off the cotton slip which seemed to be her sole undergarment. Retaining the sleeveless black voile, the only dress I saw her wear night or day, she plumped up the pillow, rescued the plaid rug which had fallen behind the bed, and without bothering to straighten the sheets, immediately fell asleep.

CHAPTER XLVI

IN SAMARKAND

THE days began late and they proceeded through a flow of small difficulties, punctuated by talk. I remember so well the first morning in the Professor's house. I woke to find sun streaming in at the window and the room empty. As I went to the kitchen in search of water, the eldest son of the house bowed to me with elegance from a rumpled bed with an enormous pink pillow at one end.

Frantic squeals came from the garden, where the elderly maid-servant, single-handed, was killing a pig. "Do not look! Do not listen!" exclaimed Marta hurrying into the house. "That animal has been a friend of the family. We were all devoted to it. My husband is much affected! He said to our good Ilinya, 'Take thou the knife, I cannot use it.' Yes, you can have the water in that bucket. It was meant for cooking, but there may be a little more in the tap. It is simpler to go every six days to the town baths, that is what I do. Would you like some of the pig's liver with your tea?"

Back through the living-room and the son's bedroom I marched, carrying the bucket. With care, I turned up the study carpet, which was a good dark Merv, and washed with satisfaction in the surprisingly cold water, after which I made both beds and recklessly opened the window. When I re-entered the living-room, I found the General's wife, white-haired and entirely bloodless, making coffee on a primus at one end of the long table. With her attention concentrated on the saucepan she ate a piece of cold tongue which had been wrapped in newspaper. Marta and the younger boy were drinking milkless tea and dividing a small herring. The Professor had

propped a scientific journal against a jar and was making notes.

"You have not bought any bread?" queried my hostess. "Take some of ours——" She produced a loaf from the cupboard and cut off an enormous brown chunk.

"In 1933," said the General's widow, "when there was a great hunger and many died, a bread like that would have cost 25 roubles and eggs nearly as much. Now, all is cheap. It is true one cannot yet live well, but one can get enough." French must once have been as familiar to her as Russian, but now she spoke it stiffly, as if her tongue could not move the heavy words.

While mother and son argued about the cutting up of the pig, whose screams had mercifully ceased, the General's widow showed me a photograph of a young man in the uniform of a Guards' officer. He was remarkably handsome. "Where is he now?" I asked.

"I don't know. Perhaps dead. I haven't heard of him for eighteen years." With more assurance she spoke of her daughter, a librarian in Tashkent. "She enjoys her work. There is nothing wrong for her. She is of the new Russia. It is very strange——" The old lady appeared to be resigned. She was certainly unafraid. Before she left, bare-headed, with a dusty black shawl over her print dress, to make the daily pilgrimage to the bazaars, she said, "It is so much better now. At last, one can make oneself a life."

The Professor looked up from his journal of biochemistry to comment, "She is right. It is all so much better these last two years. Now one can have a good life. There is not nearly so much propaganda and a great deal more comfort."

I repeated my contention about the children. "You spoil them so thoroughly—how will they endure the discomforts which you grown-ups take as a matter of course?"

"Youth is our most effective weapon," retorted the Professor, pushing back his shock of dark hair.

We argued on familiar lines and I discovered that my host, like so many of the intellectuals working in Central Asia, was a Jew, but he regarded his origin as neither racial nor religious. He was the most detached Jew I have ever met. He said, "We have a special type of brain. That is all. It is, I think, manipulative rather than creative. We can make use of the circumstances by which you are defeated."

With his elbows on the hideous linoleum cover, he talked of Russia, which he saw as a symbol of evolution. He said, "The past has gone. The present doesn't really count, except in so far as it affects the future. We are making something bigger than mere history."

Later, as we walked towards the great avenue and the University, he became practical. "We need more specialists and we can afford to pay them. Even now a professor may earn fifteen hundred or seventeen hundred and fifty roubles a month, and if his wife works as well—in an intellectual capacity—she can earn at least a thousand. One of my friends is a gynæcologist. He gets two thousand roubles a month from the hospital and another seventeen hundred and fifty as a visiting specialist, besides which he holds night classes and is well paid for them."

At the rate of twenty roubles to the pound, I computed that the said specialist must earn about three thousand English pounds a year.

"The Government is building a new type of house for specialists. Each will have six rooms, including the kitchen, and there will be a bathroom and perhaps even a servant's room."

So the terrors and the ideals of Communism are giving way to a Socialism rendered elastic by the need of experts!

It was very quiet under the acacias and the black elms. I missed the sound of traffic. "There are no private cars in Samarkand," explained the Professor, "unless it may be that one is given as a great honour to a doctor, a shock-worker, to anybody who has done special service."

A droshky with the usual sullen driver on the box rolled slowly past. It did not occur to the Professor that it might be hired. Feet were meant to be walked upon. When they gave out, one sat down. We passed several people with inadequate boots seated under the trees. They did not look at all depressed.

The Professor continued to supply information. "The Government fixes the prices in hotels and on the railways, so these are cheap,* but private enterprise can ask what it likes. That is why the droshkys and the small private cafés are so ruinous." As we walked, we passed a number of students hurrying to their classes. They were mostly Usbegs, but they appeared to be of a different race from their peasant relations bartering in the wind-swept markets. Sovietisation has transformed the young Central Asian from something unthinkingly animal to a combination of the mechanical and the philosophical. It is a curious and perhaps a passing phase. With the exception of the English-speaking student, tall, brushed and spontaneously elegant, who took me to cafés where we paid the equivalent of half a crown for glasses of nauseous coffee and cakes tasting of chalk, and to the night-club, reminiscent with its board walls and unshaded lights of Alaskan camps, I found most of my new acquaintances talked of the Soviet and themselves as indissoluble, but they had no real—or Leninesque—conception of Communism. They were not even Marxists. Some of them had exaggerated ideas about the importance of their particular republic. All of them knew more about politics than geography. The majority thought Moscow was far ahead of any other capital in science, architecture, civilisation, art and the general amenities of life. Not one knew anything about living conditions in "capitalist countries." But they all knew the names of foreign politicians and the obliquity of their aims! On the subject of agricultural or industrial

* A hotel room in Samarkand cost 10 roubles a night. The first-class fare with sleeper from Termez to Moscow, representing six days and nights of travel, would cost less than £10 sterling.

development they were often interesting, for they had been encouraged to think. They saw the future in terms of metal, silk and cotton. Their enthusiasm was easily roused by figures. And the "millions" of silk-worms' eggs, distributed each spring for the peasant women to carry home in small boxes under their arm-pits and to cherish until, as frothing golden cocoons, they could be taken back in barrow-loads to the factories, stimulated their imagination as much as the growing acreage irrigated by the really remarkable hydro-electric plant at Vaksh Stroi.

But that second day in Samarkand left me with two abiding impressions. The first was of amiable chaos and the second of a beauty historic yet transitory.

After leaving the Professor at his Faculty, among a crowd of young men and girls, most of them very brisk and with the situation entirely in their hands, I walked on to the hotel, where I had agreed to meet the Jewish doctor of the train. He was not sitting on the pink porch as I had expected. The girl in the pen denied all knowledge of him. But I knew the number of his room, so I went to it and banged on the door. A guttural choke answered me. Entering, I found the unfortunate man speechless and swollen on the bed, from which blanket and sheet had fallen. His eyes stared at the dirty window. Between each breath came a startling pause. Automatically I looked round the room, but the fibre suitcase, open and empty, seemed to have contained nothing but the barest toilet materials and a few books. The man on the bed was still wearing the shirt and trousers which had been drenched the previous afternoon. Oddly enough, the embroidered skull-cap still adhered to his wild hair.

All I could do was to prop him in a more comfortable position, cover him, and go in search of help.

My first efforts were unsuccessful, for the hotel people expressed, if not indifference, at least the extremes of inadequacy. So I went out with the sprawling Asian to look for a doctor. No droshky appeared, so we walked